Exploring the mental health and positive youth development (PYD) of students and the services, opportunities, and supports provided in rural, low socio-economic status (SES) high schools to strengthen student mental health and PYD

by

Jason Erik Hughes

B.S., West Virginia University, 1992
M.S., West Virginia University, 2001

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Curriculum and Instruction
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Abstract

This collective case study sought to explore the status of the mental health and Positive Youth Development (PYD) of students attending rural, low socio-economic status (SES) high schools and to identify the school-based services, opportunities, and supports high schools are providing to strengthen student mental health and PYD. The research was guided by the following questions: 1) what factors do students and school staff in rural, low SES high schools identify as contributors to mental health problems in youth and what specific mental health issues do they believe students struggle with the most, 2) how do students and school staff describe the level of confidence, competence, connection, character, compassion, and contribution of students attending rural, low SES high schools and what specific school actions do they believe build and develop these characteristics in students, 3) what specific services, opportunities, and supports do rural, low SES high schools provide to strengthen mental health and the confidence, competence, connection, character, compassion, and contribution of students?

This multi-case design began with contacting seven rural, low SES high schools in Kansas and seven in West Virginia. A quantitative survey was conducted with sophomores and juniors in each school. The data collected in the survey were used as a factor in determining the four schools for the collective case study and to triangulate data in the study. In addition to the data from the surveys, conversations via Zoom and phone were conducted with school administrators to ascertain which four schools implemented similar interventions to address student mental health and PYD. Two schools in Kansas and two in West Virginia were selected and a visit was conducted at each school. While at each school, open-ended semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with two student groups and one school staff group.

Observations were made while at the school and pertinent documents were collected for the purpose of answering the research questions and triangulating the data from the focus group interviews.

A collective case study with four similar schools was used to provide more robust evidence. The findings of the study illuminate the current status of the mental health and PYD of students attending rural, low SES high schools. Students and school staff together identified pressure, home life, technology, bullying, and stigma as contributors to mental health problems in youth and believed that anxiety, stress, depression, lack of health coping, and suicidal comments were the most pressing mental health issues for students in their schools. PYD levels in each school varied between students but was strongly linked to core academic subjects and school-based opportunities. The modeling, intentionality, words, and actions of adults in schools along with providing students with diverse opportunities and voice emerged as the actions within a school that have the greatest impact on student PYD.

Food distribution, access to a licensed mental health therapist or counselor, providing a school-based social resource, after-school programming, robust social-emotional learning interventions, and career, college, and workforce services were the major services implemented by the schools to strengthen student mental health and PYD. Providing student leadership opportunities, co-curricular and extracurricular activities, and college, career, and workplace readiness activities were the major opportunities schools provided students to strengthen their mental health and PYD. Academic supports, teachers, counselors, positive behavior interventions and supports, and trauma informed care were the major supports provided in the schools to strengthen student mental health and PYD.

Recommendations are made based on practices discovered in the four schools. Implications for practice include strategies to relieve student pressure and to assist them in navigating problems that arise due to home life, technology, and bullying. Additional strategies for reducing mental health stigma in schools are provided along with ideas on how to build and strengthen the confidence, competence, connection, character, compassion, and contribution of students. Recommendations for future research are also presented.

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Major Professor
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Dedication

To my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Your word and presence has sustained me throughout my life. I have leaned on Your promise throughout this journey, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

To Carrie, thank you for always believing in me and being my best friend. To Carson, Landon, Arlee, Anna, and Juniper, your Grandpa loves you and hopes you will discover a love for learning, a hunger for always chasing your dreams, and a passion for serving others.

Chapter 1 - **Introduction**

Introduction

The ideal characteristics of mental health in childhood can be summarized as, “the achievement of development and emotional milestones, healthy social development, and effective coping skills, such that mentally healthy children have a positive quality of life and can function well at home, in school, and in their communities” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013, p. 2). Unfortunately, the current reality of the mental health status of our children is far from ideal, as over sixteen percent of children in the United States aged 12-17 have been diagnosed with a mental health issue, including anxiety and depression (Zablotsky & Terlizza, 2020). Mental health issues in childhood can negatively impact healthy social, emotional, and cognitive growth and development and lead to higher risk of mental disorders in adulthood; accompanied with more serious consequences, such as suicide, substance abuse, impaired physical health, and decreased productivity (CDC, 2013). “Mental health or psychological well-being is influenced not only by individual characteristics or attributes, but also by the socioeconomic circumstances in which persons find themselves and the broader environment in which they live” (Kapungu et al., 2018, p. 3). When comparing the mental health of children living in rural environments with those in urban, rural children are more likely to have mental health problems (Gale et al., 2019; Lenardson et al., 2010; Nichols et al., 2017). Compounding this issue of mental health in rural areas are the negative socioeconomic circumstances in which many rural families find themselves living. Rural children with mental health issues are more likely to come from families who live in poverty (Gale et al., 2019; Lenardson et al., 2010; Nichols et al., 2017).

The concept of Positive Youth Development (PYD) is applied in three different, but related ways; referring to the developmental process of youth, a set of principles and a philosophy centered around focusing on youth assets instead of deficits, and the practices of programs, organizations, and initiatives that deliver on the principles of youth development in fostering a healthy growth and development process for youth (Hamilton et al., 2004). PYD is grounded in the theoretical frameworks of the developmental systems theory (DST) and the ecological systems theory (EST). DST posits that individuals develop as they interact within their current contexts. This process of development is plastic, not static, and is ongoing as individuals are being continually transformed by multiple interactions within multiple contexts (Duerden et al., 2010). Therefore, "all youth can experience positive development so long as they are provided with the necessary assets and opportunities" (Duerden et al., 2010, p. 123). In EST, "development is a process influenced by interactions both within and across individual contexts" (Deurden et al., 2010, p. 123).

Schools are part of an intricate and intimate microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) where students interact not only with curriculum and programming, but also with people. Due to these multiple interactions, schools play a critical role in youth development, not only academically, but also socially and emotionally (Osher et al., 2014). Within a school, there can be multiple support points through individuals: peers, teachers, coaches, administrators, and support staff; numerous activities and opportunities: classes, clubs, sports teams, specialized courses, and the arts; and many programs and services such as, social-emotional learning and counseling that students interact with on a daily basis. Since youth spend the greater part of their time at school, and because the need is great, there has been an increased focus in many schools and school systems on the social-emotional health, psychological well-being, and PYD of students. This

increased focus has revealed how important the role teachers, administrators, and other support personnel play in improving overall student health and insuring a more positive transition to adulthood (Nichols et al., 2017). Yet there has been limited research conducted focused on the student perspective of their own mental health and PYD in the context of the school, or on the implementation of the various interventions aimed at strengthening student mental health and PYD. Structured school-based youth development activities, such as sports and clubs, have traditionally been associated with positive outcomes in youth, yet these programs can differ in design and quality, and therefore, produce varying results (Duerden & Witt, 2010). Research has also indicated the positive differences certain curricular offerings at schools, such as Career and Technical Education (CTE), can have with students (Smith, 2017). This study seeks to explore and discover what the current status of student mental health and PYD is in rural, low SES high schools, and what school-based services, opportunities, and supports are being implemented to strengthen mental health and PYD.

Rationale

"Rural students and the schools they attend receive little attention in either policy or academia" (Lavalley, 2018, p. 1). Countless research has been conducted on students in poverty, but much of that research has focused on poor students in urban areas. A review of the literature on rural students in poverty indicates a significant amount of research was conducted in the 1990's (Khattri et al., 1997) and early 2000's (Weber et al., 2005) but very little has been conducted since. There has been an immense amount of research conducted on the impact of poverty on student success, but the bulk of that research has focused on the academic outcomes of students in urban areas. Lavalley (2018) suggests, "Poverty is often associated with urban areas, but poverty in rural America actually exists at higher rates, is felt at deeper levels, and is

more persistent than in metropolitan areas" (p. 4). Research has also indicated rural students experiencing poverty are more likely to have a mental health problem compared to urban students in poverty (Lenardson, et al., 2010). The research that has been conducted consists of conflicting views on how best to close the achievement gap, engage students in poverty, understand poverty and the students and families experiencing it, and how to improve the mental health and outlook of students (Duckworth et al., 2007; Dweck, 2016; Gorski, 2016; Payne, 2005).

Two major theoretical frameworks have emerged from research concerning students experiencing poverty; a deficit model and an assets-based model. These two frameworks serve as a lens for the conclusions made by various researchers. Some conclude educators must inspire poor students to develop a "growth mindset" (Dweck, 2016, p. 7) while others preach the concept of assisting them in the development of "grit" (Duckworth et al., 2007, pp. 1087-1088). There are others who deem both of these approaches a form of "deficit ideology" (Gorski, 2016, p. 379) and conclude these approaches only serve to make the student in poverty feel like the problem is inherent within them instead of being caused be societal forces happening around them and that educators should build upon their existing strengths. Gorski (2016) writes, "deficit ideology is rooted in the belief that poverty is the natural result of ethical, intellectual, spiritual, and other shortcomings in people who are experiencing it" (p. 381). In contrast to Gorski, you will find the writings about students in poverty of Ruby Payne (2005) in her book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*. Payne writes of people experiencing poverty as the source of their own problem and socially underdeveloped (Payne, 2005). In referring to grit ideology, developed by (Duckworth et al. 2007), Gorski (2016) writes, "The most obvious trouble with grit ideology

is that, of all the combinations of barriers that most impact the educational outcomes of students experiencing poverty, not a single one is related in any way to students' grittiness" (p. 382).

Within a different, but connected context, the deficit and assets-based models serve as frameworks for discussing and researching youth development. For the greater part of the twentieth century, the adolescent period was viewed as a time of tumult and emotional upheaval, and youth themselves were viewed as at-risk, unruly, and in need of being fixed (Lerner & Lerner, 2013). By the latter part of the century however, a new view of youth was emerging focused more on the internal strengths of youth and the external assets embedded within the various contexts and environments youth interact with in their life. Another important revelation associated with this shift in outlook for youth was the understanding that the path of youth development is not fixed, but plastic, and can be significantly influenced by people and experiences in their home, school, and communities (Lerner & Lerner, 2013). From this new way of thinking about youth, an assets-based approach, Positive Youth Development (PYD), emerged. PYD "seeks to prepare young people to meet the challenges of adolescence through a series of structured, progressive activities and experiences that help them obtain social, emotional, ethical, physical, and cognitive competencies" (Development Services Group, 2014, p. 3). PYD is more than just an attempt to fix the problems of youth, it is about nurturing and leveraging the strengths they possess through meaningful interactions with people and experiences, and in the process, developing and enhancing their confidence, competence, connection, character, and compassion (Lerner, et al., 2000) in ways that propel them to make contributions (Lerner et al., 2005) that improve their own lives as well as the lives of others. Most of the research conducted on PYD has been conducted in the context of organizations and programs occurring outside of the school environment, such as 4-H involvement.

The back and forth debate over what is effective and what is not when working with rural youth experiencing poverty has left teachers, administrators, and social-emotional support staff with more questions than answers. There has been limited research conducted in rural schools focused on student mental health and a dearth of research on PYD in the school setting; therefore, there exists a void in the literature in identifying the specific school-based services, opportunities, and supports schools are implementing to strengthen student mental health and PYD.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the status of the mental health and PYD of students attending rural, low SES high schools and to identify the school-based services, opportunities, and supports high schools are providing to strengthen student mental health and PYD.

The study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What factors do students and school staff in rural, low SES high schools identify as contributors to mental health problems in youth and what specific mental health issues do they believe students struggle with the most?
2. How do students and school staff describe the level of confidence, competence, connection, character, compassion, and contribution of students attending rural, low SES high schools and what specific school actions do they believe build and develop these characteristics in students?
3. What specific services, opportunities, and supports do rural, low SES high schools provide to strengthen mental health and the confidence, competence, connection, character, compassion, and contribution of students?

Operationalization of Constructs

For the purpose of this research, the following terms are defined as:

Low SES Schools – Schools with a higher percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced lunch compared to other schools in their respective state (West Virginia Department of Education, 2020; Kansas Department of Education, 2020).

Rural School – A school located in a community classified as rural or town using the National Center of Education Statistic's urban-centric locale categories (Provasnik et al., 2007).

Student Mental Health – The ideal characteristics of mental health in childhood can be summarized as, "the achievement of development and emotional milestones, healthy social development, and effective coping skills, such that mentally healthy children have a positive quality of life and can function well at home, in school, and in their communities" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013, p. 2).

"*Five Cs*" of Positive Youth Development (Lerner et al., 2000)

- *Competence* – Positive view of one's actions in specific areas, including social, academic, cognitive, and vocational.
- *Confidence* – The internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy; positive identity; and belief in the future.
- *Connection* – Positive bonds with people and institutions—peers, family, school, and community—in which both parties contribute to the relationship.
- *Character* – Respect for societal and cultural rules, possession of standards for correct behaviors, a sense of right and wrong (morality), spirituality, integrity.
- *Compassion*/Caring– A sense of sympathy and empathy for others.

Contribution – Enacts the behavior of all five "Cs" by contributing positively to self, family, community, and civil society (Lerner et al., 2005).

Services – Actions done to or for youth intended to improve their health, safety, and overall well-being (Pittman et al., 2003).

Opportunities – Actions by youth where they are actively engaged in interacting with others in real world scenarios and solving problems (Pittman et al., 2003).

Supports – Activities done with youth to facilitate access to interpersonal relationships and resources (Pittman et al., 2003).

Limits and Possibilities of the Study

There is a heightened interest in the mental well-being of youth and the results of this study can inform the many individuals involved with teaching and working with youth. Drug abuse and drug related deaths, as well as suicide rates among young adults is on the rise in rural areas across the United States (Gale et al., 2019). Individuals and agencies that work with youth and young adults have a desire, now more than ever, to know the best practices in preparing youth for a well-adjusted and successful transition into adulthood. This study has the potential to open up new possibilities and understandings in the substantive framework of PYD and to impact the praxis of teachers, school administrators, parents, and youth volunteers. With the focus in public schools predominately being on standardized test scores, the PYD framework to a great extent, has been missing in our nation's classrooms. The data from this research has the potential to get the attention of educational decision makers and create an awakening of the importance of educating the whole child and adapting our measurement of success to that purpose.

This study is delimited to the survey results of sophomores and juniors, focus group interview responses of students and adults, observations made, and documents analyzed from two rural, low SES high schools in Kansas and two in West Virginia. This study was conducted during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Even though it was made clear to the participants this was a non-COVID-19 study, the subject of the pandemic did come up at various points during the focus group interviews. It is impossible to the know the extent of the impact the pandemic had on

the responses of the students and adults, but great care was taken to clarify various statements and to separate out comments directly made or indirectly connected to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Dissertation Organization

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter one is an introduction to the study including the rationale for the research, research purpose and questions, operationalization of constructs, and limitations, delimitations, and possibilities of the study. Chapter two is a comprehensive review of the literature on the context of rural education, the context of poverty and low SES schools, student mental health, ecological contexts and assets of youth, PYD, and the services, opportunities, and supports available to students in schools. Chapter two also addresses how the study seeks to fill the existing gaps in the literature concerning the mental health and PYD of students attending rural, low SES high schools. Chapter three provides the research methodology, including researcher subjectivity, epistemological and theoretical perspective, theoretical framework, rigor and trustworthiness, data sources and collection, interview instrument and protocol, and data analysis strategies. The research findings will be provided in Chapter four and will also include descriptions of the school settings, participants, and states. Specific and detailed excerpts from the focus group interviews with students and adults at each school, supported by relative data from the quantitative instrument used to select the cases school, observations, and school documents will be provided. The final chapter will be Chapter five and will include an interpretation of findings and presentation of conclusions along with implications for practice and recommendations for future research.

Conclusion

The greater volume of research focused on students experiencing poverty is conducted with urban students, and most of that research focuses on academic success. This study focuses

on students attending rural, low SES high schools and expands the concept of student success beyond just academic – to mental, social, and emotional success. Informing this study is the PYD framework and the desired positive development outcomes expressed as the "Five Cs": competence, confidence, connection, character, and compassion (Lerner et al., 2000) along with the sixth "C" of contribution (Lerner et al., 2005). This study aims to discover what high schools are doing to strengthen the mental health and PYD of rural students experiencing poverty, and hopefully all youth, and ideas for preparing students for a well-adjusted and successful transition to adult life. To accomplish this aim, a collective case study involving qualitative methods conducted in two schools in Kansas and two in West Virginia, consisting of student and school staff focus group interviews, student survey data, observations, and document analysis were utilized. The results of this study will inform multiple stakeholders such as teachers, school administrators, school social-emotional support staff, parents, and youth volunteers.

Chapter 2 - **Review of Literature**

The Rural Context

Nearly one of every seven students in the United States attended a public school located in a rural school district in the 2016-17 school year (Showalter et al., 2019). Public school systems located in rural and town classified communities (Provasnik et al., 2007) serve a different population of students than school systems in cities and suburban areas. A greater percentage of students attending rural and town schools are White and the schools they attend are smaller (Provasnik et al., 2007). Rural schools and the communities they serve, together possess a unique set of traditions and history, yet the rural values that shape the people living there tend to be consistent across all rural locations. Wagonfeld (2003) proposed the list of rural values "as self-reliance, conservatism, a distrust of outsiders, religion, work orientation, emphasis on family, individualism, and fatalism" (as cited in Slama, 2004, p. 10). These strong core rural values when mixed with common rural realities of unemployment, isolation, and poverty, can lead to unhealthy approaches to both physical and mental health (Slama, 2004) and in turn shape the attitudes and behaviors of youth in these communities.

Rural schools are receiving more national attention, yet many rural schools "continue to face nothing less than an emergency in education and well-being of children" (Showalter et al., 2019, p. 1). Critical social issues facing rural schools today include: students with adverse childhood experiences, poverty and food insecurity, drug and alcohol abuse, poor mental health, lack of access and availability of important services and supports for mental health and overall well-being, and student mobility (Beesley et al., 2010; Gale et al., 2019; Schafft, 2003; Showalter et al., 2019). Children living in rural counties are more likely to be physically, sexually, and emotionally abused than children living in urban and large metropolitan areas

(Sedlak et al., 2010). A major issue currently compounding the abuse experienced by children in rural areas is drug abuse and addiction. Deaths from drug overdoses are increasing at higher rates in rural areas compared to all other locales (Mack et al., 2017). Many of the individuals who have either died from drug abuse or are caught in the grips of addiction, are parents of school-aged children. The drug epidemic has forced many grandparents to take on the role of parenting, and left them with the daunting task of nurturing children who may have experienced any number of traumatic experiences, including being born addicted to a certain drug, lack of interaction with parents and siblings, family conflict, and uncertainty about the future (Smith & Palmieri, 2007).

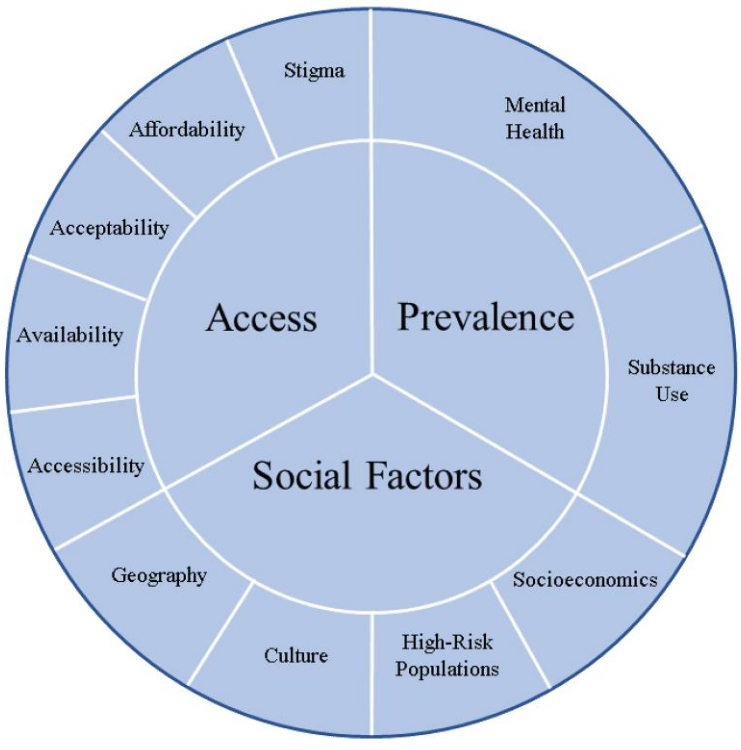
Poverty rates in rural areas are higher than in non-rural locales and children who experience poverty are more likely to experience physical and mental health challenges and struggle developmentally and academically (Lenardson et al., 2010; Nichols et al., 2017; Showalter et al., 2019). Poor residents of rural communities have limited access to mental health services, are less likely to have health insurance, and because of the rural value of self-sufficiency, are less likely to seek assistance for mental health issues because of the stigma they feel in their small, close-knit community (Slama, 2004). Children in rural areas experience higher rates of food insecurity than children in non-rural areas. Food insecurity has been linked to higher rates of mental health issues and lower educational attainment (Showalter et al., 2019).

From 2013-2015, suicide rates were 55 percent higher in rural areas than in large urban areas. Higher rates of suicide in rural areas are attributed to limited access to mental health services, the stigma associated with poor mental health, high levels of substance abuse, greater availability of firearms, and a lack of timely health care (See Figure 2.1, Gale et al., 2019). Although illegal drug use rates are similar between rural and urban areas, many rural

communities are seeing an exponential growth in the use of prescription opioids, heroin, and methamphetamines (meth). The drug overdose death rates in rural areas is now higher than in urban areas, spurred on by a 325 percent increase between 1999 and 2015 (Gale et al., 2019). In 2018, the rural state of West Virginia had the highest drug overdose death rate in the United States with 51.5 deaths per 100,000 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). Rural youth are more likely than their urban peers to engage in risky drug and alcohol-related behavior, including binge drinking, driving under the influence, and meth use. The rates of serious mental illnesses, depression, and suicide are higher among students in rural areas than in urban (Gale et al., 2019).

Figure 2.1.

Context of Rural Mental Health (Gale et al., 2019)



"Research suggests that highly mobile students (students who enter and leave school other than at the beginning or end of the school year) are less successful academically, drop out of school at higher rates, and require more frequent disciplinary action" (Beesley et al., 2010, p. i). The issue of student mobility is typically associated with schools in urban, high poverty areas, however, the mobility of students from low SES families does impact rural schools too (Schafft, 2003). Because rural schools tend to be smaller in size, the impact of student mobility can have greater influence on the overall performance of a rural school compared to larger urban schools (Beesley et al., 2010). Many smaller, rural schools and communities, lack the resources to address the needs of highly mobile students (Schafft, 2003).

In many rural areas, due to instability in the home and lack of access to resources in the community, the school takes on the most influential and consistent role in the development of a child. Connecting students to various ecological assets in the form of people, services, opportunities, and supports is critical to strengthening their mental health and PYD and preparing them to lead a healthy and productive adult life.

The Context of Poverty and Low SES Schools

The United States has the highest poverty rates for children among industrialized nations, 18 percent in 2018. To make matters worse, we provide fewer social supports for student well-being and fewer resources for them at school (Darling-Hammond, 2010). According to 2018 data of childhood poverty rates, the state of Kansas was below the national average with 15 percent and West Virginia was above the national average with 24 percent (Hussar et al., 2020). Socioeconomic status (SES) has been found to be a "consistent and reliable predictor" (Office of Socioeconomic Status, 2010) of multiple outcomes in the life of an individual, including physical and mental health. Research indicates that low SES experienced in childhood is related to poor

cognitive and social emotional development (Elliot, 2016; Lacour & Tissington, 2011; Ready, 2010).

Children in families of low SES are at a significantly higher risk to experience physical, sexual, and emotional abuse compared to children who are not from families of low SES (Sedlak et al., 2010). Research has indicated that childhood abuse is linked with depression and anxiety experienced in later adolescence and adulthood (Springer et al., 2003). The rate of severe mental health issues is four times greater in poor communities compared to more affluent neighborhoods and the teachers and administrators in those poor community schools are usually tasked with the challenge of supporting student needs with less resources. "Thus, inequality and poverty, through problems associated with mental health, can easily overburden the faculty of schools that serve poor youth, making it harder to teach and to learn in such institutions" (Beliner, 2013, p. 11).

Students attending school in low SES communities need access to services, opportunities, and supports, and yet, due to economic conditions in the community, these schools often lack the resources to provide children with what they need to succeed academically and to overcome the psychological hurdles linked to poverty (Office of Socioeconomic Status, 2010). To meet the needs of rural students experiencing poverty and a variety of other social difficulties, rural, low SES schools need a highly skilled and trained staff of teachers, administrators, and support staff to meet the complex needs of many students. Unfortunately, many rural, low SES schools struggle to hire and retain highly qualified teachers, administrators, and support staff – which can serve as yet another challenge for the students attending these schools. Reasons for these staffing shortages can include: inadequate funding, social and geographic isolation, and limited access to quality professional development (Gale et al., 2019; Showalter et al., 2019). "In the United States, teachers are the most inequitably distributed school resource (Darling-Hammond, 2010,

p. 40). Azano & Stewart (2015) argued that hiring and retaining highly qualified teachers in rural, low SES schools "is an issue of justice and equity" (p. 3) and advocated for a new approach to rural education where "the experiences of all cultural, racial, geographic, and socioeconomic contexts are valued and integrated into the curriculum" (p. 3).

Academically effective low SES schools are those able to provide cross-curricular activities that connect the curriculum to the lived experiences of the students (Lacour & Tissington, 2011). Certain school characteristics have been discovered to consistently predict increased student achievement even when controlling for socioeconomic status. These school organizational characteristics include: the academic emphasis, the faculty's collective efficacy, and their trust in parents and students (Hoy et al., 2006). Berliner (2013) argued that those involved in educational reform can no longer ignore "the powerful and causal role of inequality and poverty on so many social outcomes that we value" (p. 9) and how "a major reduction of poverty for America's youth might well improve America's schools more than all other current educational polices now in effect" (p. 10).

Mental Health of Youth

Strong mental health is "a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community" (World Health Organization, 2004, p. 10). Developing and nurturing good mental health in children is critical to ensuring their healthy transition to adulthood and positively impacting their overall well-being, growth, self-esteem, academic and career attainment, and contributions to society (Kapungu et al., 2018). "Mental health disorders in childhood can negatively affect healthy development by interfering with children's ability to achieve social, emotional, cognitive, and academic milestones and to

function in daily settings" (Ghandour et al., 2019, p. 256). In their study of over 40,000 children aged 3-17 years, Ghandour et al. (2019) found depression and anxiety problems to be most prevalent in adolescents 12-17 years of age with anxiety issues most common among non-Hispanic White children and the prevalence of depression higher among children living in poor households.

All youth have basic needs that need met if they are to grow and develop into productive, well-adjusted, and contributing adults. Young people "must find ways to earn respect, establish a sense of belonging to one or more highly valued groups, make close and enduring human relationships, and build a sense of personal worth based on useful skills" (Carnegie Council of Adolescent Development, 1995, p. 22). They must also learn how to manage conflict, exhibit ethical behavior, and how to access available social support systems (Carnegie Council of Adolescent Development, 1995). These basic needs of youth are met with a harsh reality of a modern society – ever-increasing expectations with fewer meaningful connections and supports for youth. During the period of adolescence, there is an increased incidence of mental health issues and feeling of alienation, more particularly in modern societies (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002). John Taylor Gatto (2005) wrote:

> This great crisis that we witness in our schools is interlinked with a greater social crisis in the community. We seem to have lost our identity. Children and old people are penned up and locked away from the business of the world to a degree without precedent: nobody talks to them anymore, and without children and old people mixing in daily life, a community has no future and no past, only a continuous present. In fact, the term "community" hardly applies to the way we interact with each other. We live in networks, not communities, and everyone I know is lonely because of that. School is a major actor

> in this tragedy, as it is a major actor in the widening gulf among social classes. Using school as a sorting mechanism, we appear to be on the way to creating a caste system (p. 21).

An individual's genetic disposition can influence their overall mental health or psychological well-being, yet research indicates the social contexts in which a person lives, the environment in which they live, and the people they interact with can also have just as much influence (Kapungu et al., 2018). For example, children from rural, low SES families experience higher rates of depression and additional mental health conditions compared to children living in other environments (Gale et al., 2019). When conditions are favorable, youth acquire critical adaptive and developmental skills through interactions with family, friends, and in their community. However, there are situations in both poor and affluent families and communities in which adults are unable or unwilling to connect and support their children (Carnegie Council of Adolescent Development, 1995). In environments devoid of connection and support, yet full of stress and trauma, many young people develop poor coping skills leading to impaired mental health.

Half of U.S. children with a treatable mental health disorder do not receive treatment from a mental health professional (Whitney & Peterson, 2019). Data from the 2016 National Survey of Children's Health indicated the prevalence of mental health disorders in children in Kansas ranged from 17.8 to 19.9 percent of all children with 46.7 to 53.1 percent of those with disorders not receiving needed treatment or counseling. The same report indicated the prevalence of mental health disorders in children in West Virginia ranged from 20.0 to 27.2 percent with 46.7 to 53.1 percent not receiving the needed treatment or counseling from a mental health professional (Whitney & Peterson, 2019). Estimates of up to 60 percent of students do not

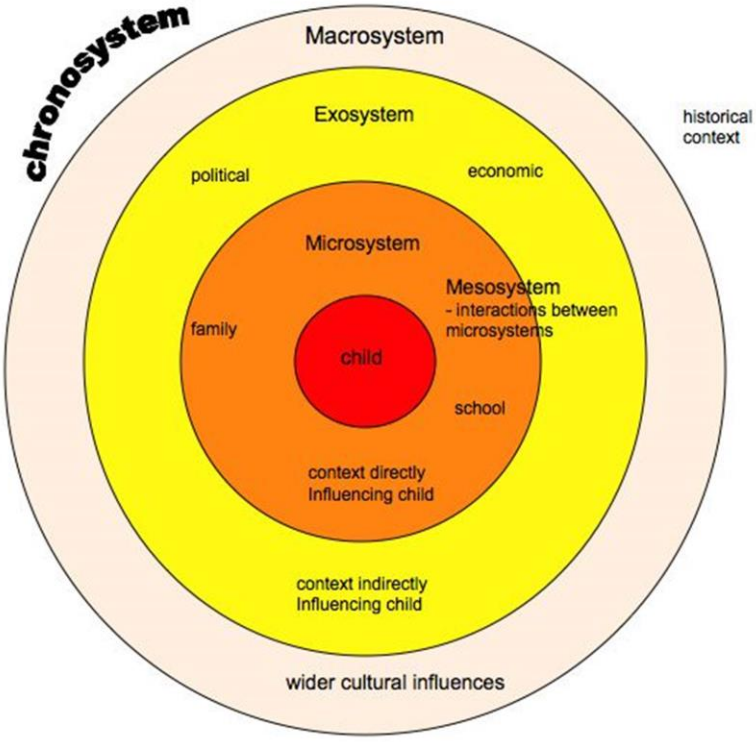
receive the treatment they need due to stigma and lack of access to services. “Of the adolescents who do get help, nearly two thirds do so only in school” (National Association of School Psychologists, 2021, para. 2). Consequently, due to budget constraints, students in rural schools typically lack access to a full-time school psychologist able to focus on the psychological needs of students (Nichols et al., 2017).

Ecological Contexts and Assets of Youth

When setting out to discover effective practices to strengthen student mental health and PYD at the school level, one must take a step back and consider the interaction of the various contexts in which students live, grow, and develop. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) Ecological Systems Theory (EST) is a foundational framework of positive youth development work and has been used as a conceptual framework for school reform (Leonard, 2011). The individual student is situated at the center of the EST model surrounded by five main systems; microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (See Figure 2.2; Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Figure 2.2.

Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)



The school environment is part of the microsystem, along with the family, and is a critical context which has direct influence on the life of a student. Contexts indirectly influencing students, yet still serving as powerful forces in the frame of this study, include the context of socioeconomic status and rural living as components of the Exosystem in the EST model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

To better understand how to positively impact the cognitive, mental, social, and emotional growth and development of youth, the characteristics of the influential environments, such as the school, within which youth are nested, need to be conceptualized and understood. The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (2002) suggested the following eight

characteristics are indicative of an environment that supports positive youth development: physical and psychological safety, appropriate structure with consistent expectations, supportive relationships, opportunities to belong, positive social norms, support for efficacy and autonomy, opportunities for skill building, and the integration of family, school, and community. Research has indicated that young people are more likely to thrive and develop positively when they are exposed to resources and experiences in their environment that match and support their developmental needs (Theokas & Lerner, 2006).

In research conducted by the Search Institute of over 100,000 children in grades 6-12, the 40 Developmental Assets framework was created (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007). The assets of this framework are divided into external and internal assets. Twenty external assets are organized in the four categories of support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, and constructive use of time. Twenty internal assets are organized in the four categories of commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies, and positive identity (Search Institute, 2006). It is critical to examine the external, or ecological assets, of youth attending rural, low SES high schools and to identify the assets most crucial to their current well-being and future transition to adulthood. Because of the domestic struggles many rural students face and the limited resources in the community; the school, in many cases, is the source of most of these external assets for youth development.

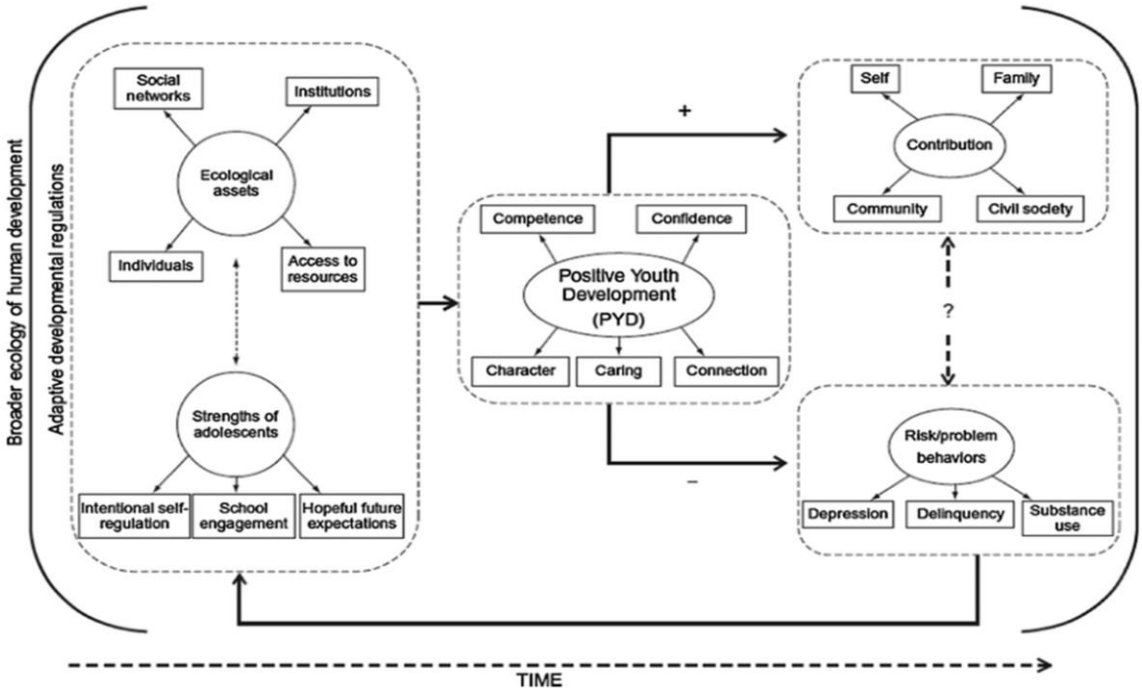
Theokas and Lerner (2006) proposed four categories of observed ecological assets with which to organize the resources and experiences within the environments of youth; individuals, institutions, collective activity (social networks), and access to resources. The people, both peers and adults, youth interact with within various contexts, expose them to various behaviors, expectations, and worldviews. In a school, caring and equipped adults can model positive social

norms and connect students to the specific ecological assets most important for each individual student's growth and development. The physical and institutional resources present in a social environment involves the structure and stability for youth created by having access to consistent and sustainable opportunities for learning, recreation, and connection with others.

It is vitally important for the various contexts of youth to be connected through mutual engagement. The social capitol of youth increases when the individuals in their home, school, and community are working together to promote healthy and positive developmental outcomes. Accessibility of resources refers to the physical ease of access, the ease of access of the human resources, and the safety of the physical environment (Theokas & Lerner, 2006). The ecological assets that exist in the home, school, and community coupled with the individual strengths of youth, make up the inputs of the PYD framework (See Figure 2.3, Bowers et al., 2014).

Figure 2.3.

Positive Youth Development Model (Bowers et al., 2014)



Positive Youth Development

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is a perspective grounded in a positive view of youth that values their strengths and assets over problematic behavior. PYD seeks to identify the environments which promote thriving during adolescent years and positive growth and development into adults who contribute to their communities and society (Lerner, 2007). It is an outlook where youth are viewed not as problems to be fixed, but resources to be developed. A framework that understands "they're not immature or incomplete adults who need constant constraint and direction, but are active partners in their own positive transition to adulthood" (Lerner, 2007, p. 10). PYD is about linking the internal individual strengths of youth with positive external assets accessible to them in home, school, and community environments. PYD is a framework that can be used to inform the services, opportunities, and supports provided to promote youth development in these various environments. A foundational theoretical framework in PYD is Erikson's Eight Stages of Development, with trust in relationships, autonomy, initiative, self-efficacy, and identity being critical during the adolescent years of development (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007).

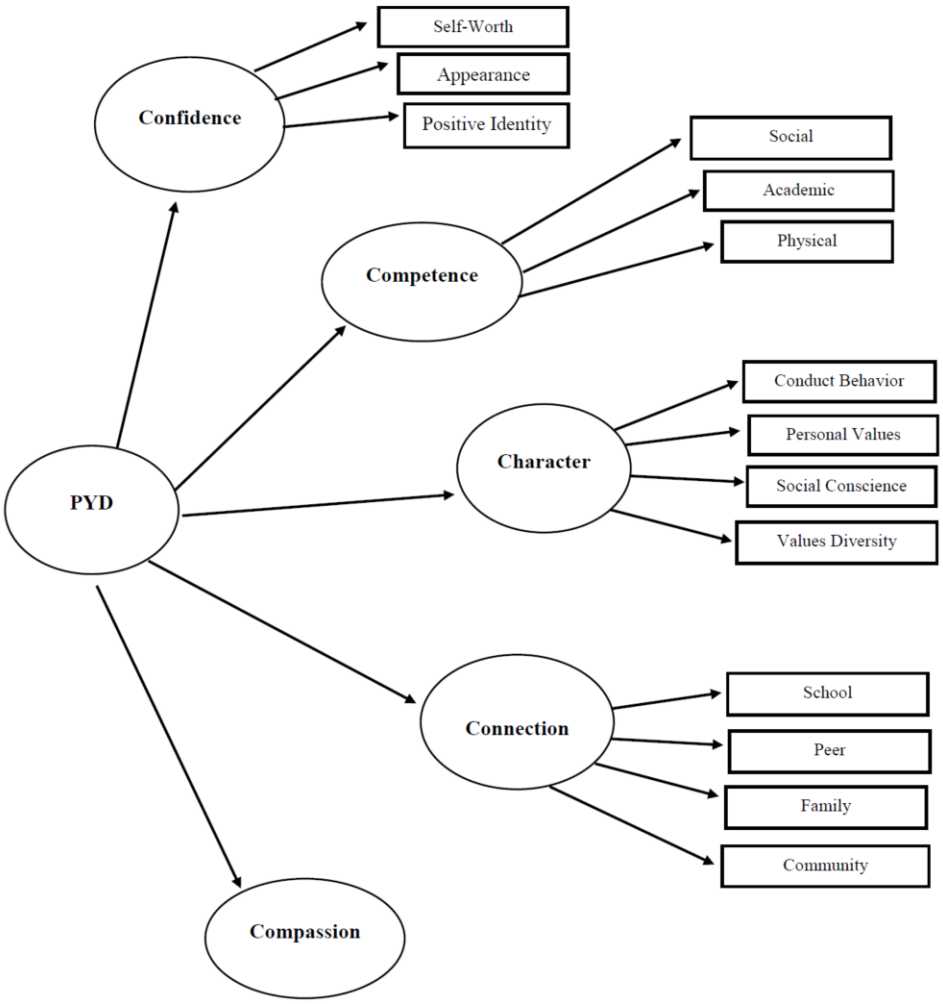
"PYD is growing concomitantly with similar movements in psychology, substance abuse, and mental health services" (Duerden et al., 2010, p. 120). The PYD perspective views youth development differently than traditional intervention and prevention efforts and holds several key assumptions. These include: a belief that all youth have the potential for positive growth and development; a positive developmental trajectory is enabled when youth are embedded and engaged in relationships, contexts, and environments that nurture their development; and youth hold a major role in their own development (Duerden et al., 2010). Research indicates the three most important features of effective youth development programs include: "positive and

sustained relationships between youth and adults, activities that build important life skills, and opportunities for youth to use these life skills as both participants and leaders" (Lerner & Lerner, 2013, p. ii).

A review of over 70 youth development programs assisted Catalano et al. (2004) in generating a list of 15 PYD constructs. The researchers concluded PYD programs seeks to achieve one or more of the following objectives: promote social, emotional, cognitive, behavioral and moral competence; foster resilience, self-determination, spirituality, self-efficacy, clear and positive identity, belief in the future, prosocial norms; and provide for recognition for positive behavior and opportunities for prosocial involvement (Catalano et al., 2004). A national study of over 7,000 4-H members indicated youth who thrive during adolescence and have smooth transitions into adulthood share similar attributes and outlooks (Lerner & Lerner, 2013). These similar characteristics and outlooks are summarized as the "Five Cs" of PYD and these include, competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring (See Figure 2.4, Geldhof et al., 2014). A sixth "C", contribution, emerges when these foundational five are present in the life of a young person (Lerner, 2007). For these six "Cs" of PYD to be nurtured in the life of an adolescent, they must have access to developmental assets – positive people, activities, resources, and institutions that promote strong and sustained growth and development (Lerner, 2007).

Figure 2.4.

"Five Cs" of Positive Youth Development (Geldhof et al., 2014)



The 4-H PYD longitudinal study set out to determine if when the individual strengths of youth are aligned with the resources of the family, school, and community during adolescence, will positive youth development occur. Some the of the key broad findings concerning positive youth development from this study included: the importance of the internal student strengths of intentional self-regulation, hopefulness about the future, school engagement, and the importance of the external, or ecological assets of individuals, institutions, collective action, and access

(Lerner & Lerner, 2013). Additional research suggests PYD interventions reduce the rate of risky behaviors, promote higher grades and college-going rates, foster a more successful transition into adulthood, improve social-emotional outcomes, inspire greater contribution to community, and reduce depression (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2012).

Competence

In the context of the "Five Cs" framework, Lerner (2007) described competence as the ability to act effectively within various environments: school, society, and work. It is about what an individual can do, not how or what they feel. Competent youth are able to navigate interactions with other people and within social institutions and make things happen in their own life. When youth are able to exercise competence in situations that arise and within various environments, they develop even more competence. Lerner suggested youth may demonstrate competence in five areas: academically, cognitively, social-emotionally, vocationally, and physically.

Lerner (2007) suggested that academically competent students do get good grades, but they also join teams, participate in clubs, and take on leadership roles within the school. These students are able to successfully navigate the school environment and adapt to circumstances as they arise. Lerner further suggested students who are cognitively competent are naturally curious and inquisitive. These students are avid readers, are creative, and have the internal drive to learn about topics and subjects that are of an interest to them. Lerner described socially competent students as having healthy, satisfying, and sustained relationships with others, including those in their peer group, and those outside of it. These students are able to navigate social situations and know how to resolve conflict and recognize the difference between people who are a threat and those who are in need. Emotionally competent students are described by Lerner as those who are

in touch with their own emotions and are able to manage and regulate those emotions in ways that propel them in the world and not hold them back. These students possess self-discipline and are able to make the adjustments necessary to get along with others and to appreciate and consider the emotions of others. Lerner suggested vocationally or career competent students work outside of school time at part-time jobs, summer jobs, internships, or work-based learning opportunities. Through these experiences, they develop competence in working with and for others and develop important career-ready skills such as, taking responsibility, solving problems, and seeing a task through until its completion. Physically competent students are those who succeed in physical activities, such as sports, and who are competent in their physical and athletic abilities (Lerner, 2007).

Developing and nurturing intrinsic motivation, completing a task or activity solely for the self-satisfaction it brings, can build and strengthen the competence of youth. Within the framework of self-determination theory (SDT), Ryan & Deci (2000) posit that intrinsic motivation is nurtured and enhanced when the three psychological needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy are met for an individual. The theory considers these to be essential for an individual's growth and integration, social development, and personal well-being. In addition to these positive development attributes, SDT also examines the social environments that both optimize and inhibit these tendencies. If these three psychological needs are not met, the mental health and well-being of the individual are negatively impacted (Ryan & Deci, 2000). One of the four categories of internal assets of youth in the 40 Developmental Assets framework is social competencies. Specific social competency assets include planning and decision making, interpersonal relationship skills, and cultural competence (Search Institute, 2006). When working directly with youth, adults can nurture competence by helping the young person recognize their

strengths, talents, and abilities. An additional way to guide youth in developing competence is to direct them to opportunities where they can build competencies that enhance their school, social, and community experiences (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007b).

Confidence

Within the "Five Cs" of PYD, Lerner (2007) suggested confidence is about youth believing in themselves and specifically, that they have the ability to achieve their goals through their own actions. This strong belief in their own knowledge and skills translates into success in areas of life important to them. Lerner posited that confidence is enhanced in youth when adults work to instill and cultivate their sense of self-determination, independence, positive identity, and self-worth. The two "Cs" of competence and confidence are interconnected, with competence being about what you can do and confidence is what you believe you can do. "The more competent you are, the more likely it is that you'll feel confident. In turn, confidence can reinforce competence" (Lerner, 2007, p. 76).

The majority of youth experience confidence differently in different situations. Lerner (2007) explained that a student may feel confident in English class writing an essay, but lack confidence sitting in math class trying to solve problems. Lerner suggested that confidence is also linked to the age of the youth and tends to develop further as teens mature and are exposed to new and different opportunities. The confidence of youth is directly tied to what they value. The confidence of youth who value their personal appearance, for example, is linked to how they look, where someone who values friendships may base their confidence on the number of friends they have (Lerner, 2007). A healthy sense of personal power, purpose, self-esteem, and optimism for the future are specific internal assets associated with a positive youth identity (Search Institute, 2006). When working with youth, adults need to encourage them to dream about their

future and plan for it by setting goals, as well as direct them to activities where they can use their strengths and talents (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007b).

Connection

Lerner (2007) suggested that where competence and confidence are individual, connection is about the importance and impact of others. A youth can have all of the competence and confidence in the world, but they still need connection with and support from others. Lerner described connection as a two-way relationship where youth are able to contribute to the well-being of others, and also have their own well-being enhanced through interaction. For youth, these interactions are mainly inside the relationships with family members, peers, teachers, coaches, mentors, and people in the community (Lerner, 2007).

When young people are able to make close connections within developmental relationships with others, they can "discover who they are, cultivate abilities to shape their own lives, and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them" (Search Institute, 2018, para. 1). Youth are able to positively grow and develop within bidirectional relationships that express care, challenge growth, provide support, share power, and expand possibilities (Search Institute, 2018). When adults are working to cultivate connection with youth, it is important to instill in them the importance of relationships being bidirectional, where both parties contribute and grow. Mentoring adults need to help youth connect with their school and community. Connectedness to school has been shown to reduce absenteeism, reduce negative behaviors, and improve academic performance (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007b).

Character

Within the "Five Cs" framework, Lerner (2007) suggested character is linked to three attributes. First, youth with character have a moral compass that aids them in determining right

and wrong in various situations. They are able to consistently do the right thing and assist others in doing the right thing. Secondly, their decision making on issues of morality is consistent and reliable. They possess personal boundaries in which they are not willing to cross and they act with integrity. Lastly, they treat others fairly and with respect and believe that what is right for one person must be equally right for everyone else. Honesty, responsibility, and restraint from destructive behaviors are additional attributes of character that can be developed and nurtured in PYD environments (Search Institute, 2006). Youth need adults they can look up to and turn to as examples of good character. It is important for adults to talk with young people about personal values and beliefs and how those influence decisions, actions, and reactions. Adults need to be available to talk and listen when young people are sorting through moral and ethical issues in their life (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007b).

Berkowitz (1997) identified seven psychological aspects of character: "moral action, moral values, moral personality, moral emotions, moral reasoning, moral identity, and foundational characteristics" (as cited by Berkowitz & Bier, 2004, p. 73). Each of these develop during the lifespan of a person with the major influence coming from family, with an opportunity for schools to have a major influence too. Character education in schools can take on many forms – service learning, social-emotional learning, and prevention programs all could be considered character building programs (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). A student's feeling of connectedness to the school environment has been found to enhance the impact of character education programs (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004).

Compassion/Caring

Lerner (2007) suggested compassion, or caring, is about showing concern about the lives of others with words and actions and developing a sense of social justice. Compassion involves

the two moral emotions of empathy and sympathy. Lerner suggested when youth are able to empathize, feel the pain of someone else, they are able to realize an inherent part of themselves and how important it is to be in positive relationships with others. The emotion of sympathy, feeling bad for someone else, allows youth to think and feel beyond their own needs. Empathy and sympathy can be modeled, nurtured, and developed in youth (Lerner, 2007).

There are numerous ways to guide youth in developing care and compassion for others. First, it is important to teach them how to set personal boundaries and practice self-care. Students need taught how to understand others when resolving conflict and to show compassion for people in need (Family and Youth Services Bureau, 2012). Within the 40 Development Assets framework of the Search Institute (2006), caring, equality, and social justice are considered positive values youth should possess as a part of their internal assets. It is important youth be encouraged to place a high value on helping people, promote equality, and work to reduce hunger and poverty (Search Institute, 2006). To nurture caring and compassion in youth, adults can direct the attention of youth to the needs and social issues taking place in their community and support them in efforts to make a difference or contribute to change (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007b).

Contribution

Contribution emerges as the sixth "C" in PYD framework and involves youth having the desire and the capacity to give back to those who have contributed to their lives. Lerner (2007) suggested contribution is about youth harnessing the personal strength they possess in the form of the "Five Cs" of PYD, competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring, and acting upon it in the form of making positive contributions in their home, school, community, and

society. Contribution is about youth realizing the power they possess independently in the world, but also the strength and need for interdependence in a connected society (Lerner, 2007).

The reality of contribution is that it is reciprocal. The five foundational "Cs" may provide youth a foundation to contribute, but when students are able make meaningful contributions in their home, school, or community, their competence, confidence, connection, character, and compassion are also strengthened and reinforced (Lerner, 2007). Young people are empowered when they are a valued member in society, are viewed as important and useful resources, and are able to serve others (Search Institute, 2006).

School Services, Opportunities, and Support

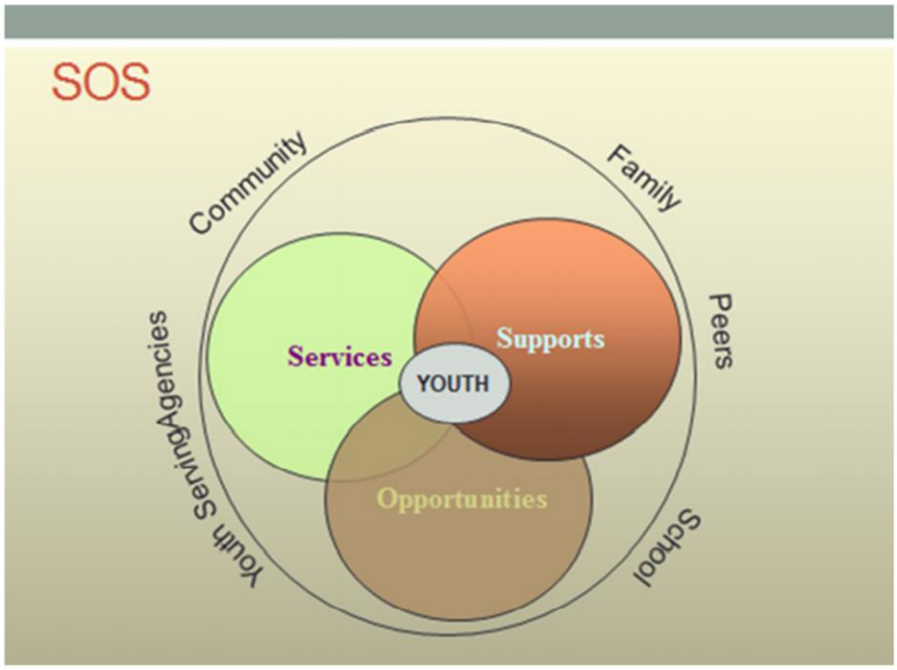
Schools have historically played a key role in youth development throughout our history as a nation. Schools are both impacted by and influence the outcomes of families and communities (Osher et al., 2014). From the perspective of offering ecological assets to students, many schools provide students a safe environment, a place to belong, positive relationships with peers and adults, a place to develop confidence and a sense of self-efficacy, social and emotional support, and leadership opportunities. Unfortunately, schools can also be stressful places for students where they are exposed to bullying, alienation, frustration with their abilities, and negative relationships with peers and adults (Osher et al., 2014).

"Young people need services, supports, and instruction. But they also need opportunities to contribute" (Pittman et al., 2003, p. 26). Communities have historically taken on the role of providing services, opportunities, and supports (SOS) for youth development (See Figure 2.5, Pittman et al., 2003), yet in many rural and poor communities, the financial resources are no longer available to support these initiatives. Schools are the center of most rural communities and becoming increasingly the site where more and more of these SOS resources are provided.

"Budget constraints and access to trained school-based and community-based mental health personnel are the more frequently cited barriers to addressing mental health in schools" (O'Malley et al., 2018, p. 782).

Figure 2.5.

Context of Youth Services, Opportunities, and Supports (Pittman et al., 2003)



Within the SOS framework, services are actions done to or for youth intended to improve their health, safety and overall well-being (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007; Pittman et al., 2003; Whitlock, 2004). Opportunities are actions by young people where the youth are actively engaged in interacting with others confronting real world scenarios and solving problems. Ideal opportunities are those which are sustained and provide youth with a voice in decision making and leadership (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007; Pittman et al., 2003; Whitlock, 2004). Supports are activities done with youth to facilitate access to interpersonal relationships and important resources (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007;

Pittman et al., 2003; Whitlock, 2004). No school program can meet the unique needs of every student, yet school staff should work to create and provide a diverse offering of services, opportunities, and supports that allow as many students as possible to connect and participate (Deurden & Witt, 2010).

Services

Services are critical interventions, such as providing food for hungry children or mental health services for youth, and are traditionally delivered through public welfare, health, and school programs (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007). With increasing percentages of youth experiencing trauma in their home and subsequent poor mental health, especially in rural communities, many schools and school systems have taken on the role of providing social-emotional services to students. The responsibility has fallen on the adults in rural schools (teachers, administrators, support personnel) to play a role in fostering student resiliency and providing social-emotional services and supports (Nichols et al., 2017).

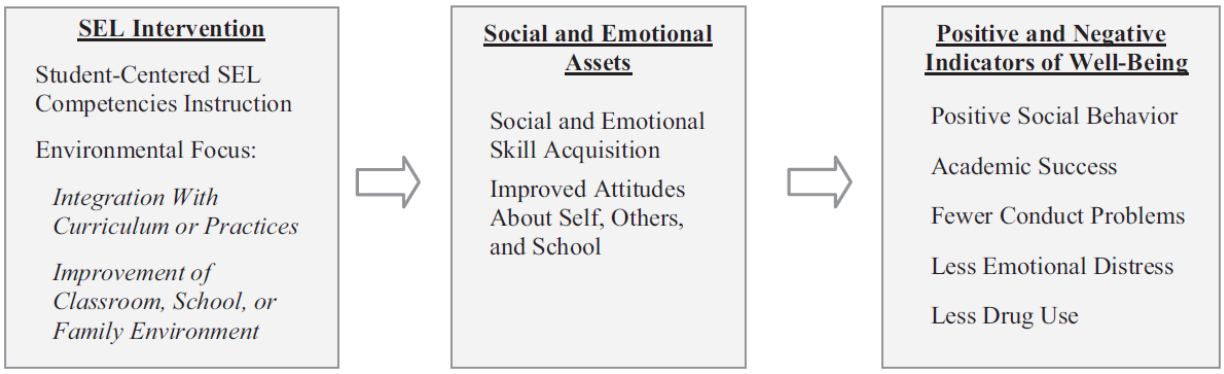
In response to growing number of social issues facing today's students, especially in rural, low SES schools, many school districts have begun hiring school-based social workers. School social workers play a critical role in schools and serve as a link between students, families, teachers, and administrators (National Association of Social Workers, 2010). School social workers connect students and families with important resources and services and are called upon to address various student problems such as, truancy, social withdrawal, social emotional issues, effects of poverty, substance abuse, and sexuality issues (National Association of Social Workers, 2010). Like many social workers, the caseload for school social workers can be high and many are responsible for more than one school in the district (National Association of Social Workers, 2010). In some schools, the social worker coordinates the social emotional

learning at the school and often has a leadership role in trauma informed care implementation (Walkley & Cox, 2013).

Social emotional learning (SEL) is closely linked to positive youth development theory as both are focused on capitalizing on the internal strengths of the individual and leveraging the ecological assets available to the student to help them thrive as well as fostering resiliency through supports and providing opportunities (Osher et al., 2014). “SEL interventions promote asset development by enhancing five interrelated cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies considered to be important for success in school and life: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making” (Taylor et al., 2017, p. 1157). A meta-analysis of 82 school-based, universal social-emotional learning interventions involving over 97,000 kindergarten to high school students found that PYD of students was enhanced through SEL interventions. The PYD benefits were found to be similar regardless of the student’s race, socioeconomic background, or school location (Taylor et al., 2017). Outcomes for this study were sorted into seven distinct categories: social and emotional skills; attitudes toward self, others, and school; positive social behavior; academic performance; conduct problems; emotional distress; and substance use (See Figure 2.6, Taylor et al., 2017). Results of the study indicated students who participated in SEL interventions benefited significantly compared to the control group in all seven outcomes (Taylor et al., 2017).

Figure 2.6.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) framework for PYD (Taylor et al., 2017)



Opportunities

"Opportunities are the vehicles that offer youth meaningful and real ways to influence the world around them, nurture their interests and talents, practice and enhance skills and competencies, and increase connectedness to community" (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007, p. 3). Schools must provide opportunities that allow youth to acquire not only intellectual skills, but also the soft skills necessary to be prepared for life (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002). In order for the mental health and PYD of students to be strengthened, they must be given opportunities to engage in their own development (Duerden et al., 2010). Co-curricular as well as extracurricular programs and activities are critical to the overall development of students. Research has indicated that participation in extracurricular activities not only influences student academic performance and behaviors, but also impacts mental health and well-being (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). Clubs, sports, art, music, Career and Technical Education (CTE), Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM), and other school-based activities and programs provide students with a place to belong, grow, and develop as they interact with peers, teachers, coaches, and mentors. Ettekal & Mahoney (2017) posited

that “youth who participate in any activity display more positive social, emotional, psychological, and physical outcomes than their non-participating counterparts” (p. 240). Certain activities are linked with more positive outcomes, for example, faith-based programs are reported by youth as the most influential to their development, and participating in a combination of activities, such as sports and an additional youth development program, is more beneficial than just participating in sports (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017).

Youth need access to opportunities in schools to develop their voice, initiative, and identity (Duerden et al., 2010). Student voice involves providing youth with opportunities to have their ideas and opinions heard and applied in the school. Students need to be presented challenges in the school environment that provide them with a venue for developing initiative. These real-world challenges or problems can be presented in learner-centered classrooms, within a club, or on a team, and promote intrinsic motivation in seeing something through until complete or solved (Duerden et al., 2010). Students gain a greater sense of their identities when given the opportunities to use their voice and apply initiative to solving real problems and challenges. Research suggests that youth engaged in voluntary structured activities, including sports and recreation, are more likely to develop a sense of identity compared to less involved youth (Duerden et al., 2010).

Schools must be a place where students have the opportunity to build career, workforce, and life skills (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002). During the 2016-17 school year, 98 percent of public-school systems offered CTE programs at the high school level (Gray & Lewis, 2018). Research shows that CTE participation increases the probability of graduating on-time by seven to ten percent for affluent students, and significantly higher for low SES students (Dougherty, 2018). Not only does research indicate students who participate in

CTE have higher earnings after high school than non-CTE students (Meer, 2007; Page, 2012), but it also suggests students enrolled in CTE benefit psychologically with increased feelings of self-worth and a strengthening of their self-efficacy (Kelly & Price, 2009). States and local school systems are looking for innovative ways to engage students and to provide them with an environment to thrive and develop. In West Virginia, the Simulated Workplace initiative of the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE) is an enhanced instructional delivery of CTE courses aligned with business and industry with a goal of making all CTE completers college and career ready. More importantly, at its foundation, it is positive youth development opportunity that enhances the student's high school experiences and prepares them for a smoother transition into adulthood. Student voice, attendance, being drug-free, safety, team work, problem solving, and accountability are core values embedded in the Simulated Workplace Initiative (West Virginia Department of Education, n.d.)

Supports

"Supports are the ongoing positive relationships that young people have with adults, peers, and organizations that provide safety, structure, motivation, nurturing, and guidance to all youth to explore, test, learn, grow, and contribute" (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007, p. 3). An important feature for a setting that promotes strong mental health and PYD is the presence of supportive relationships with others. Schools need adults who are warm and caring and who purposively connect with students through good communication, guidance, and responsiveness (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002). PYD research indicates strong relationships develop when time and space are intentionally made for youth and adult interactions (Duerden et al., 2010). Youth need schools to support their self-efficacy and mattering. Schools need to empower students with responsibilities and leadership that matters

and give them some autonomy to make decisions and mistakes (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002).

Many students living in rural locales and experiencing poverty have been exposed to adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). ACEs are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood and could include: experiencing abuse or neglect; witnessing violence; substance abuse in the home; mental health problems in the home; toxic stress; and instability in the home due to parental separation (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2019). In response to the effects of ACEs, many school district and school-level administrators have implemented trauma informed care (TIC) to support students. A TIC approach in schools is based on six key principles: safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; and cultural, historical, and gender issues (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). The TIC approach in schools becomes part of the overall school culture and informs the practice of teachers, administrators, counselors, and social emotional staff. Data collected from trauma informed schools indicates significant decreases in suspensions, expulsions, and discipline referrals (Walkley & Cox, 2013).

In the case of rural students experiencing poverty, it is critical for students to not only have caring adults at the school, but also adults that understand their lived experiences and sense of place. Research has indicated that nonparental adults have a positive effect on youth who live in poverty (Beam et al., 2002). Eckert & Petrone (2013) found that even teachers originally from rural areas themselves had deficit and lack thinking about the students they taught attending rural schools. “Place-based pedagogy is a method and practice of grounding learning in a student’s sense of place or the lived experiences shaped by people, cultures, and histories” (Azano & Stewart, 2015, p. 2). Rural students need teachers who appreciate the importance of place and

value their lived experiences, and who build teaching and learning around these realities (White & Reid, 2008). In the Azano & Stewart (2015) study, student teachers teaching in rural schools for their placement indicated the importance of developing relationships with students and community connectedness. These same student teachers however, also shared the perception that many of their rural students were unmotivated and often found it challenging to engage the students during instructional activities.

State Social-Emotional Support Context

Kansas

The Kansas Department of Education (KSDE) launched the Kansans Can School Redesign Project in 2017. The project was launched in response to the realization that an 87% state graduation rate is not high enough and that many students were not being served by the education system. KSDE leaders and Kansas State Board of Education members conducted community conversations with teachers, parents, business leaders, and community members before setting a new vision for education. The feedback from these meetings sent the message, "Academic skills are important, but so are nonacademic skills, such as critical thinking, teamwork, perseverance, and civic engagement" (KSDE, 2020b, p. 3). "Kansans also said we need to move away from a 'one-size-fits-all' system that relies exclusively on state assessments to measure student success" (KSDE, 2020b, p. 3). The goal is to have all Kansas' public-school districts started in the redesign process by 2026. Currently, more than 71 of Kansas' 286 school districts are taking part in various project phases, named after NASA missions. The two Kansas schools in this study are included in the 71 districts who are already taking part in the redesign project.

Based on the feedback from stakeholders, the Kansas State Board of Education identified the following five key outcomes by which to measure progress: social-emotional growth of students measured locally; ensuring all children enter kindergarten at age five socially, emotionally, and academically prepared; providing each student, starting in middle school, with an Individual Plan of Study focused on student's career interests; increasing high school graduation rates to 95 percent; making sure students are civically engaged by the time they leave high school; and increasing the percent of high school graduates who earn postsecondary degrees and certificates from 44 percent to 71 percent (KSDE, 2020b). The school redesign process is driven by the following four principles: student success skills (including social-emotional growth); family, business, and community partnerships; personalized learning; and real-world applications through project-based learning, internships, and civic engagement (KSDE, 2020b).

Kansas was the first state to adopt social-emotional learning standards. The Social, Emotional, Character Development (SECD) standards were adopted in 2012 and revised in 2018 by the Kansas State Board of Education. The standards are "designed to help keep children safe and successful while developing their academic, social-emotional, and post-secondary skills" (KSDE, 2021b, Social Emotional Character Development: Standards, Assessment and Instruction section, para. 1). The standards have three main areas: Character Development, Personal Development, and Social Development. The focus of the character development standards are core principles of character and responsible decision making and problem solving. The focus of the personal development standards are self-awareness and self-management. The focus of the social development standards are social awareness and interpersonal skills (KSDE, 2018).

West Virginia

The West Virginia Legislature responded to the increase of student mental health issues with the passage of HB 206 in 2019, which provided funding for school districts to provide "direct social and emotional support services to students, as well as professional personnel addressing chronic absenteeism" (West Virginia Department of Education, 2020b, p. 3). According to the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE), "In many West Virginia districts, school mental health professionals are overburdened by huge caseloads, where a majority of the children are low income and are high risk due to social and emotional issues related to the opioid epidemic" (WVDE, 2020b, p. 3). Many school districts across the state are hiring additional school-based professionals to support student mental health needs, including school counselors, school psychologists, social workers, school nurses, and Communities in Schools site workers (WVDE, 2020b). According to the WVDE (2020b):

> Having professional student support personnel as integrated members of the school staff empowers principals to more efficiently and effectively deploy resources, ensure coordination of services, evaluate their effectiveness, and adjust supports to meet the dynamic need of their student population. Improving access also allows for enhanced collaboration with community providers to meet the more intense or clinical needs of students (p. 4).

The WVDE has collaborated with other state and local agencies to develop several prevention, intervention, and social-emotional wellness programs in West Virginia Schools. Common Ground Speaker Series provides schools and school districts with an opportunity to request guest speakers from military service organizations to speak on a variety of topics, such as substance abuse prevention and anti-bullying (WVDE, 2020b). WV Graduation 20/20 is an

initiative focused on addressing issues that have negatively impacted school completion (WVDE, 2020b). Prevent Suicide West Virginia is a program managed by the WV Department of Health and Human Services and increases the capacity of suicide prevention education, including training for school personnel when requested (WVDE, 2020b). The WVDE promotes Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and has implemented it in 37 of 55 counties (WVDE, 2020b). PBIS is a "systems-change process for an entire school or district with a focus of teaching behavior expectations in the same manner as any core curriculum subject" (WVDE, 2020b, p. 10). Trauma-Sensitive Schools provide increased access to behavioral and mental health services through community collaboration (WVDE, 2020b).

Chapter 3 - **Methodology**

Research Design

This collective case study sought to explore the current mental health and Positive Youth Development (PYD) of students and the services, opportunities, and supports provided in rural, low SES high schools to strengthen student mental health and PYD. This collective case study method was utilized to explore the issues of student mental health and PYD by closely examining four similar schools, or cases, so each could provide illumination to the issues and potential best practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each school was the subject of its own fieldwork and covered as a single-case study "before arriving at findings and conclusions across the individual case studies" (Yin, 2018, p. 54). This method was selected because, as Herriott and Firestone (1983) indicated, multisite qualitative case studies can strengthen generalizability while still preserving rich description. Therefore, this method is regarded as more robust compared to a single site case study.

The four sites were selected to seek in-depth understandings of each school, while "embracing a constant-comparative perspective that allows for the emergence of broader insights, or themes" (Johnson et al., 2011, p. 9). This approach provided an opportunity for cross-case comparisons where similarities and differences could be highlighted and it offered greater generalizability of findings compared to a single case study with only one school (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Additionally, the case study method was selected because it provided me the opportunity to serve as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis in investigating real and challenging issues happening at the school level, thus allowing for rich, descriptive information to inductively emerge (Merriam, 2009).

This collective case study sought to provide "illumination and understanding" (Hays, 2004, p. 218) to the contemporary issues of student mental health and PYD. Hays (2004) stressed the importance of remaining focused as a researcher when conducting a case study and the importance of setting boundaries through the use of the research questions. "The single most defining characteristic of case study research lies in delimiting the object of study, the case" (Merriam, 2009, p. 40). This study was bounded by time and place (Creswell & Poth, 2018), as the study was delimited to four rural, low SES high schools in Kansas and West Virginia during the spring semester of the 2020-21 school year and involved only the students attending and adults working in and with those schools. The bounding of this study was also inspired by the microsystem concept in the Human Ecology Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A school is a microsystem comprised of "activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22).

Yin (2018) suggested:

> The simplest multiple-case design would be the selection of two or more cases that are believed to be literal replications, such as a set of case studies with exemplary outcomes in relation to some evaluation questions. Selecting such cases requires prior knowledge of the outcomes, with the multiple-case inquiry focusing on how and why the exemplary outcomes might have occurred and hoping for literal (or direct) replications of those conditions from case to case (p. 59).

Each case in the study was carefully and purposively selected so that individual cases would predict similar results, a literal replication (Yin, 2018). The four schools, cases, in this study, even though located in two different states, were selected based on initial student survey data and conversations with school administrators about their implemented practices to address

student mental health and PYD. It was believed similar results would emerge from each school within the context of the bounded case study.

The collective case study method served me well in accomplishing my research purpose and answering my research questions. Since I was working with different high schools in two different states, it was critical I be prepared with a protocol for interviews, observations, and document analysis in advance so I could maximize the time spent at each school. A case study method allowed me to spend a focused, yet relatively shorter period of time at each site, but still "uncover new explanations, interpretations, and cause-and-effect connections" (Hays, 2004, pp. 218-219) in strengthening the mental health and PYD of rural high school students experiencing poverty.

Researcher Subjectivity

In the process of conducting this research, I made sure to address my own subjectivity; since I grew up in a working-class home in a rural area. I also have personal experience working with rural students experiencing poverty and have witnessed the toll poor mental health can take on youth. Prior to becoming a doctoral student, I was a high school Agricultural Education teacher for 13 years and a coordinator with the West Virginia Department of Education for another 13 years. During my teaching career, I taught three years at a technical center located in an urban area and ten years at a rural high school. I worked with many students in both schools who experienced poverty and had great need at home. Throughout my career in education, I have witnessed many rural, poor students excel in school and in life after high school. Unfortunately, I also engaged with students, both rural and urban, poor and affluent, who had mental health struggles in their youth that lead to more devastating outcomes as young adults, including substance abuse and suicide.

The subject of mental health is even more personal to me because three of my own children have struggled with depression, anxiety, and addiction. The subject of positive youth development is also personal to me as my entire career in education has been dedicated to developing and providing positive youth development opportunities to students through education, specifically the Career and Technical Education (CTE) area of Agricultural Education. I believe CTE programs can positively impact the mental health and PYD of both poor and affluent students from both rural and urban communities; therefore, I made sure to constantly check this bias through reflection and journaling as I conducted research in schools with School-based Agricultural Education and additional CTE programs.

Reflexivity was an ongoing component of the research process as I addressed my own subjectivity through journaling and memo writing during focus group interviews, observations, document analysis, and data analysis. The following is an excerpt from my reflexivity journal concerning my feelings after hearing many students in the study share how adults in their life put pressure on them:

> Hearing the students discuss how their teachers and parents put pressure on them about making good grades and having a plan for their future makes me think about how I raised my own four children. As I reflect, I realize I put a lot of undue pressure on them about being the best and excelling in all that they do. I realize now, I did not stop near enough just to ask them how they were doing.

Epistemological and Theoretical Perspective and Framework

My research is grounded in the epistemology of constructionism. The purpose of my research was two-fold, first, to understand how students in rural, low SES high schools make meaning and connection with their own mental health and youth development, and the services,

opportunities, and supports provided at their school to strengthen their mental, social, and emotional health and youth development. Secondly, to understand how administrators, teachers, and social-emotional support staff make meaning in their schools as they interact with students from rural areas experiencing poverty and what services, opportunities, and supports they believe work in making a positive difference in their development and supporting these students mentally, socially, and emotionally.

Through the constructionist lens, the goal of the research was not to discover a set truth, but to uncover how those involved in rural education day in and day out construct meaning from their experiences and what they believe is occurring (Crotty, 2015). As Crotty (2015) suggested, this approach is not clearly objective or subjective but a bringing together of both. Pragmatism is a philosophy deeply rooted in constructionism, and connected strongly to education. Pragmatism is concerned about what works in the real world, and specifically in education, how to prepare students to live in the real world (Moore, 1988). Pragmatism informed my research purpose of exploring how schools are working to prepare rural youth experiencing poverty to be successful adults, through strengthening their mental health and PYD.

The theoretical perspective that served as the lens of my research was interpretivism. My purpose was to understand what was happening at the school level, as experienced by students, administrators, teachers, and social-emotional support staff, and perhaps through this gained understanding, discover what works and what doesn't work in assisting rural students experiencing poverty in developing strong mental, social, and emotional characteristics in preparation for adulthood. Many studies have been conducted in this arena using a positivist approach by comparing test scores of students with the goal of remaining objective. While this approach does produce usable data, it does not provide students and school staff a voice, or real

and tangible practices that could actually be used to improve education and the lives of students. In order to go deeper in the understanding of human and social reality, interpretivism emerged as a new and different option to positivism (Crotty, 2015). There was a level of causality I hoped to bring out in my research between the connection of school and classroom practice and positive outcomes of youth development and mental health. The interpretivist theoretical framework and the case study methodology lent themselves to searching for a level of cause and effect. Max Weber (1962) posited that the concepts and generalizations of sociology are such that they can contribute to a causal explanation of some phenomenon.

The finer lens for my research in the realm of interpretivism was symbolic interactionism. So much educational research addresses how the educational system objectively impacts the students, a top down approach. Educational research, informed by symbolic interactionism, sets out to shift the focus away from the institution and to the individual student or teacher and their subjective viewpoints, a bottom up approach. Instead of being concerned with the objective structures of the educational system, symbolic interactionists within education are more concerned with understanding how those involved with and impacted by education make subjective meaning from their interactions with each other and the system (Carter & Fuller, 2015).

The philosophy behind symbolic interactionism is pragmatism which was a great fit for my research since my ultimate goal was to understand what is working at the school level in strengthening the mental health and PYD of rural high school students experiencing poverty. Symbolic interactionism emerged from the pragmatic work conducted at the University of Chicago mainly by George Herbert Mead, who was greatly influenced by John Dewey (Crotty, 2005). It is no surprise that my own educational philosophy aligns with that of John Dewey who

as Crotty (2005) put it, believed "the authentic meaning of ideas and values is linked to their outcomes and therefore to the practices in which they are embedded" (p. 73).

The symbolic interactionism lens informed the methodology of this study. If I was to ultimately understand the constructed meanings of others, I had to use methods allowing me to put myself in their place (Crotty, 2015). In the case of my research, I was the sociological observer and therefore I had to discipline myself and address my own subjectivity and bias to make sure I was capturing the true meanings of those in which I was interacting (Mitchell, 1977). As a substantive framework, the six positive outcomes (competence, confidence, connection, character, compassion, and contribution) within the PYD model served as a basis for my research questions and this framework provided a focus for my case study (Lerner et al., 2000; Lerner et al, 2005). The PYD model is endorsed for the development of asset rather than deficit-based intervention and programming for youth.

Rigor and Trustworthiness

Throughout the collective case study, methods were used to produce rigorous and trustworthy research through reflexivity and triangulation methods (Hays, 2004; Mitchell, 1977). For the quantitative survey used to collect initial information on student mental health and PYD in each school, and to assist in the selection of cases, rigor was established through the use of existing quantitative instruments with strong internal consistency reliability. The PYD Questionnaire Short Version (Geldhof et al., 2014) has a Cronbach's ranging from .80 to .93 in multiple studies. The CES-D (Locke & Putnam, n.d.) survey has a Cronbach's alpha ranging from .84 to .90 in field studies.

Rigor was established throughout the case study through persistent engagement and observation, peer debriefing, member checking, and through providing rich, thick description of

findings. Confirmability of the study was established through researcher reflexivity and triangulation of multiple data sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Potential bias in this study was addressed in the subjectivity statement and through researcher journaling and memo writing. During all of the data collection, I maintained a researcher's journal to document my own reflexivity and to serve as a space to record memos on my data and protocols, including additional questions and emerging connections and patterns. Stake (1995) indicated that reflective practice throughout the duration of the case study enhances the overall quality and rigor of the study. The approach of using multiple sources of data for each research question provided for triangulation and makes the findings more comprehensive (Hays, 2004).

The use of triangulation makes it more likely for my findings to be trusted and addresses problems with construct validity in my research design (Hays, 2004; Yin, 2018). Triangulation was established by comparing the multiple data sources; quantitative survey data, student and adult focus group interviews, school observations, and school documents. Additionally, at each step of the coding and analysis process, the data was sent to my major professor for peer review providing credibility to the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To enhance accuracy and credibility further, I conducted member checks with each school. The principals at each school were asked to "corroborate or question" (Hays, 2004, p. 233) the community and school descriptions and the services, opportunities, and support summary for research question three. This member checking plays an important role in adding validity to my research. Dependability was established by providing rich description of the study methodology and maintaining an audit trail of the data collection and analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participant Selection

Initial School Selection for Student Survey

In order to accomplish the purpose of this study, answer the research questions, select four similar school cases, and create a bounded case study, it was imperative to identify schools in West Virginia and Kansas that initially met the following two criteria: a high percentage of students who qualify for free and reduced lunch and schools located in a school district classified as either rural or town using the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) urban-centric locale classification system (Provasnik et al., 2007). A third criteria was also used in selecting each school – the school had to offer a School-based Agricultural Education program. This criterion was used for two reasons. First, it would guarantee there was at least one CTE program at the school. Secondly, I believed this would increase the level of cooperation for the study and increase the chances of having a champion of the study located at the school because of the relationship and connection I have with the Agricultural Education profession.

Using this three-criterion approach, the initial plan for selecting the schools for this study was to only select schools classified as high poverty, which according to the United States Department of Education (Hussar et al., 2020), is a school with over 75 percent of students eligible for free and reduced lunch. This presented a problem, as no school in West Virginia met this criterion and very few in Kansas did. At this point, I decided to identify the ten schools in each state with the highest percentage of students eligible for free and reduced lunch and that met the additional two criteria. Free and Reduced Lunch count data was located on the respective websites of the West Virginia Department of Education (WVDE, 2020) and Kansas State Department of Education (KSDE, 2020).

I made phone calls to the superintendents of each school district of 10 schools in each state to explain the purpose and details of the study and to seek initial support and approval of the study. I emailed a sample template to each superintendent to use on their own school district letterhead to complete, sign, and send back (Appendix A). Seven initial superintendent support letters, four from West Virginia and three from Kansas, were received. The superintendent support letters from these seven school districts were submitted with the initial application for human subject research to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Kansas State University, and approval was granted (Appendix B). I made follow-up emails and phone calls to school districts that did not send support letters and received two more from West Virginia and two more from Kansas.

The initial phase of the case study involved having sophomores and juniors of each school complete a quantitative survey focused on mental health and PYD. The results of the survey were used to assist in the selection of cases and in the triangulation of data collected during the case study. For this phase, I once again reached out to each superintendent who had forwarded a support letter for the purpose of thanking them for their support and asking them to connect me with the appropriate school administrator at each school to discuss the research and begin the process of distributing student informed consent/assent forms. Once superintendents confirmed their continued interest and connected me with a school principal, I emailed each principal to introduce the study and to set up a day and time to conduct a Zoom meeting to discuss the study further (Appendix C). Ultimately, I was able to connect with the school principal in five schools in Kansas, and five in West Virginia to begin the conversation about the initial survey. Zoom sessions were conducted with each principal, and any additional staff members identified by the principal, to discuss and explain the process of student informed

consent/assent and administering the survey. As a follow-up to the Zoom session, I emailed the student informed consent/assent form file (Appendix D) and a draft cover letter (Appendix E) to place on school letterhead to use if they felt it would help increase student participation. Each school volunteered to make enough copies of the informed consent/assent forms and distribute to every sophomore and junior in their school. A window of time was agreed upon that worked best for the school to distribute the informed consent/assent forms and to have them due back at the school.

Many of the school administrators sent letters home with the informed consent/assent forms and some even emailed parents to increase the number of students who returned their forms. In the end, both myself and the school administrators learned how challenging it can be to have students return signed documents for a research study back to school. Once all of the informed consent forms were collected and witnessed, a copy was made, and the forms were filed at the school and with me. A link to the survey was emailed to the school principal after all informed consent/assent forms were received. The principal decided upon a day and class period that would work best for their school and students for completion of the survey. Most schools had their students complete the survey during their advisory period. When students were gathered to take the survey, the school principal presented each participant with a signed copy of their informed consent/assent form. In the five West Virginia schools, a total of 53 students completed the survey, with two schools having only four students complete the survey. In the five Kansas schools, a total 63 students completed the survey, with one school having only five students complete the survey. A total of 116 students in 10 schools completed the survey.

Case Selection for Qualitative Case Study

The four schools for the collective case study were selected based on a combination of three major factors: the results of the quantitative survey, the level of survey participation, and phone conversations with school administrators and social-emotional support staff about their mental health and PYD initiatives. First, I had several Zoom, email, and telephone conversations with the school principals and social-emotional support staff of each school and knew about the various initiatives they were being implemented to address student mental health and PYD. The four schools selected for the multiple-case study were implementing similar interventions. Secondly, the four schools selected had 77 of the 116 total students who took the survey, which indicated a higher level of cooperation with the study and desire to participate. Two of the four schools, one in West Virginia and one in Kansas, together had a total of 57 survey completers. Lastly, the descriptive statistics from the initial survey of two of the four schools, one in West Virginia and one in Kansas, when compared to all other schools, indicated students scored lower on the depression part of the survey and higher on the PYD portion of the survey. The combination of these three factors informed the selection of these four similar, rural, low SES high schools, with the hope of illuminating further the factors of student mental health and PYD and the services, opportunities, and supports rural, low SES high schools make available to students.

Student and Adult Focus Group Participation Selection

Once the four schools were selected for the collective case study, a modification application was sent to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Kansas State University to conduct fieldwork in each of the four schools, including student and adult focus group interviews, and approval was granted (Appendix F). After IRB approval was received, I emailed

the school principal from each school informing them their school was selected for the next phase of the research and requesting a day and time to conduct a Zoom session to discuss the next steps and to decide if they wanted to participate in the next phase (Appendix G). Zoom sessions were conducted with each school to explain how fieldwork in the school would involve focus group interviews with students and adults, observations, and document collection. The process of selecting student and adult focus group participants was discussed, as well as a process for distributing and collecting informed consent/assent forms.

Each of the four schools enthusiastically and supportively agreed to participate in the collective case study and an ideal date to conduct fieldwork in the school was set along with a back-up date if necessary. A summary of the Zoom conversation was sent via email as a follow-up to the meeting which included a process for selecting students and adults for focus group interviews (Appendix H). The follow-up email also included the student informed consent/assent forms (Appendix I) for the focus group interviews and the adult informed consent forms (Appendix J) for the focus group interviews. After a poor return rate of informed consent/assent forms for the initial survey, I decided it was important to have strong participation in the focus group interviews and provided an incentive of a $10.00 Amazon gift card for students who returned their signed form and participated in the entire focus group interview. The gift card proved difficult to purchase through university purchasing guidelines, so each participating student ended up receiving $10 in cash. The incentive did work, as a total of 35 students returned their forms and participated in the focus group interviews at the four schools. The use of this incentive was included in the IRB modification form.

Great care was taken in the selection of each focus group at each school. I worked with each school principal to purposively select students and adults who would honestly share their

thoughts and feelings and be in the best position to answer the questions about student mental health and PYD during the focus group session. In order for members of focus groups to honestly share, they need to feel comfortable with each other (Rabiee, 2004). Krueger and Casey (2000) stressed the importance of investing time and effort in selecting members of a focus group because some group members may not be as trusting as others. Krueger (1994) recommended organizing homogeneous groups for creating an environment where richer data will emerge from engaged focus group participants. Therefore, for this study, instead of grouping many different types of students into one larger focus group with 10-12 students, two smaller student groups of five to seven students were created at each school. The first student group was comprised of students who had various levels of school involvement, but had also benefitted from mental health and PYD services and supports at the school. The second student group consisted of students who had various levels of school involvement, but had not used mental health and PYD services and supports at the school. One adult focus group was organized at each school. I worked with the school principal to make sure the following adults were involved: school principal, school counselor, social-emotional support staff, teacher, and coach.

Data Collection

To develop a deep and rich understanding for this study, multiple sources of data were accessed, which Yin (2018) posits is a major strength of the case study method. The three research questions provided focus for the data collection process. A quantitative survey was used for the purpose of providing data triangulation and to assist in the selection of the four schools for the multiple-case study. Semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted at each school with students and adults to provide rich description of findings. Observations were made,

pictures were taken, and school documents were collected at each school to provide rich description and triangulation.

Research Questions

Creation of three overarching research questions was the initial step in data collection. The first research question was created to uncover what students and school staff identify as factors that contribute to poor mental health in students and the specific issues students struggle with the most. The second research question focused on the six constructs of PYD and the level of each among students in the school and how the school works to strengthen each area. The third research question was created to identify the services, opportunities, and supports rural, low SES high schools are implementing to strengthen student mental health and PYD.

Quantitative Survey

A quantitative survey to ascertain the mental health and PYD of sophomores and junior students in each school was utilized for the next step in data collection. The surveys were completed at each school during the month of March. The information collected in the survey was used to provide triangulation of data and to assist in the selection of the four cases, two schools in Kansas and two in West Virginia. Two existing research instruments were combined into one Qualtrics survey and some additional demographic questions were added to create the survey (Appendix K).

The PYD Questionnaire is used to model pathways of positive youth development and outcomes such as self-worth, personal identity, contribution, and depression. The “5 C” model (Lerner et al., 2000) is endorsed for the development of asset rather than deficit-based intervention and programming for youth. Developed by Geldhof et al. (2014), the PYD Questionnaire Short Version, consists of 34 statements that are rated on a 5-point Likert scale

(1=Not at all like me, 5=Just like me) measuring the 5 personal attributes (Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring) of the PYD model. The questionnaire is designed to provide an overall PYD score and sub scores for each of the five "Cs." The internal consistency reliability of the scale (Cronbach's alpha) range from .80 to .93 in multiple field studies. The development of the "5-C's" survey is based upon the PYD model. It combines pre-existing items from five primary sources, 1) Search Institute Profiles of Student Life— Attitudes and Behaviors, 2) Self- Perception Profile for Children (SPPC), 3) Teen Assessment Project (TAP) Survey Question Bank, and composite of items from 4) The Eisenberg Sympathy Scale, and 5) The Empathic Concern Subscale of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index, each with their own reliability and validity. The theoretically expected patterns of association between this instrument and other assessments within the "5-C's" measurement model suggest validity of this instrument. The PYD questionnaire was designed for youth ranging in age from 10 to 18 years. In a similar study, conducted in Indiana and comparing 4-H involvement with non-4-H involvement, post-hoc reliabilities for each of the "Five Cs" and total PYD were: Competence (.63), Confidence (.79), Connection (.90), Character (.86), Caring (.82), and Total PYD (.73) (Robinson et al., 2012). Eight additional questions were included on the survey to measure the sixth "C", contribution, of PYD (Lerner et al., 2005). The Cronbach's alpha for the 42 item PYD assessment used in this study, which included questions for all six "Cs", was .94. The Cronbach's alpha for each of the PYD constructs were: Competence (.76), Confidence (.90), Connection (.84), Character (.76), Caring (.90), and Contribution (.82).

The CES-D (Locke & Putnam, n.d.) is a tool for identifying a group at-risk for depression and for studying the relationship between depressive symptoms and other variables. The 20-item self-administered scale measures the major components of depressive symptoms, including

depressive mood, feelings of guilt and worthlessness, psychomotor retardation, loss of appetite, and sleep disturbance. The assessment consists of 20 statements that are rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale (0=Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day), 1=Some or a little of the time (1-2 days), 2=Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days), and 3=Most or all of the time (5-7 days) based on ways the individual has felt or behaved during the past week of their life. A possible range of scores is zero to 60.

In testing, the CES-D was found to have very high internal consistency and adequate test-retest repeatability. Validity was established by patterns of correlations with other self-report measures, by correlations with clinical ratings of depression, and by relationships with other variables that support its construct validity. The internal consistency reliability of the scale (Cronbach's alpha) ranges from .84 to .90 in field studies. Test-retest reliability ranges from .51 to .67 in 2- to 8-week intervals and .41 to .54 in 3- to 12-month intervals. Validity studies have found CES-D to have correlations ranging from the .50s to .80s with the Hamilton rating scale. The CES-D assessment was designed for non-psychiatric persons over 18 years of age, however, a longitudinal research study of Chinese youth looking at positive youth development and adolescent depression used the CES-D assessment with youth under the age of 18 and found the instrument showed good internal consistency with Cronbach's $\alpha > 0.85$ (Zhou, 2020). The Cronbach's alpha for the CES-D assessment used in this study was .93.

Additional questions were added to the survey in order to make mental health and PYD comparisons based on age, gender, family structure, race/ethnicity, residence location, CTE enrollment, co-curricular participation, extracurricular participation, leadership involvement, community organization involvement, and classroom learning delivery models experienced during COVID-19. The survey was reviewed by my committee for face and content validity. An

email with the link to the survey, along with instructions and reminders, was sent to each school principal after signed student informed consent/assent forms were collected and the principal contacted me requesting the link (Appendix L).

Semi-Structured Focus Group Interviews

Interviews with students and school staff served as the most important means of securing rich and essential data within the case study (Hays, 2004; Yin, 2018). Informal, open-ended, semi structured interviews were used with both students and adults in an effort to build rapport, trust, and empathy between myself and the participants (Hays, 2004). Creswell and Poth's (2018) procedures for preparing and conducting interviews were followed in this study. I determined open-ended questions to be asked that would answer the three research questions of the study. In collaboration with each school principal, I identified interview participants based on purposeful sampling procedures. Eight open-ended and semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with a total of 35 students attending the four schools in the study and four focus group interviews with 21 adults who work in or with the schools. The interviews were conducted during the month of April, 2021. The interviews were audio recorded on an iPad, and iPhone for backup, in a quiet, distraction free room with chairs set up in a semi-circle pattern facing me. I also wrote hand-written notes during the interviews.

An interview protocol was designed and piloted before use in the field. I piloted the focus group protocol with two different groups of Kansas State University Agricultural Education students and their feedback proved to be invaluable. The students in the pilot suggested the re-wording of some questions so high school students would better understand what was being asked of them. The most important suggestion the pilot group gave was to make sure I provided an information sheet to give to participants so they could reference it for key terms and meanings

during the interview when needed. I used all of their suggestions and modified the focus group interview protocol (Appendix M) and developed an information sheet (Appendix N). The same interviews questions were used for both students and adults, but a separate adult focus group protocol was created (Appendix O).

School Documentation

Various documents and records were collected from the school and later reviewed, including school policy statements, student behavior referral records, graduation data, post-graduation student data, social-emotional learning materials, community demographic data, advisory period information, and other pertinent documents. As Hays (2004) suggested, these documents and records can be used to "collaborate or elaborate" (p. 229) information from other sources. I checked in with each school principal as the date for the school visit approached and also sent an email with an attachment asking for specific documents to be pulled together, before the visit, so more time would be available during the visit for interviews and observations (Appendix P).

School Observations

Time was also spent during each school visit making classroom, lab, hallway, and lunch room observations. I captured photographs of various posters on the wall connected to student mental health, PYD, and student activities, and of certain rooms and areas in each school used to assist students or build PYD. Informal observation data collection was utilized over a specific observational protocol because more time was dedicated during the school visit to focus group interviews (Hays, 2004). I developed a guide to use during school visits to make sure certain observations were made if possible (Appendix Q). I maintained a peripheral role during observations (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002).

Data Analysis

As I began the process of analyzing and interpreting my data, the research questions remained in the forefront of my thinking and continually reminded me that the purpose of a case study is to answer questions and not gain a complete understanding of what is happening at the site (Hays, 2004). Analyzing the data collected in case studies is inductive work. Therefore, a coding system was developed to categorize the data in a way that answered the research questions "in a meaningful, thick description that provides a summarization" (Hays, 2004, p. 232). Inductive analysis, according to Bhattacharya (2017), involves "systematically coding, sorting, categorizing, building some organizational structure, visualizing your data, and constructing themes" (p. 177).

Quantitative Survey Data Analysis

For the initial quantitative survey, results for each of the 10 individual schools were analyzed using SPSS® software. The means and standard deviations for the total students who took the survey for each school were generated for each question on the survey and a total depression score mean and standard deviation along with a total PYD score mean and standard deviation were generated for each school. The possible range of scores for the total depression score were zero to 60, with higher scores indicating the presence of more depression. For the PYD overall scores, the values were rescaled to a range of zero to 100 to make it easier to compare results. A higher score indicates a stronger individual possession of that specific PYD construct.

Independent samples t-tests were used to reveal any significant differences of depression and PYD between the means of students on the basis of gender, grade level, family structure, race/ethnicity, residence location, CTE involvement, co-curricular participation, extracurricular

participation, leadership involvement, community organization involvement, and classroom learning delivery models experienced during COVID-19.

A summary of the survey results for each school was compiled and sent to the school principal (Appendix R). The summary provided the specific school means and standard deviations for each question and total depression and PYD along with the mean of the combination of all five schools in their respective state for a point of comparison. A comparison of results in each state were also made and used as one of the factors in the selection of the four schools for the case study.

Once the four schools were selected for the collective case study, SPSS® software was used again to analyze just the data from the four schools. A total of 77 students completed the initial survey representing the four schools in the case study. The data was combined and means and standard deviations for the total students (n=77) were generated for each question on the survey and a total depression score mean and standard deviation along with a total PYD score mean and standard deviation were generated. This data is not summarized in Chapter four, but was used for triangulation purposes and included in appropriate places of the results chapter to substantiate certain themes or sub-themes that emerged from the study.

Focus Group Interview Data Analysis

The process of data analysis with a focus group interview actually begins during the interview, "by skillfully facilitating the discussion and generating rich data from the interview, complementing them with the observational notes and typing the recorded information" (Rabiee, 2004, p. 657). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), data management begins the process of data analysis. After each focus group interview, I captured initial thoughts and notes in my field notebook and made sure to save the audio file from each interview on a secure university

provided computer and cloud-based storage for back-up. Each audio file was uploaded to Otter.ai™, an online transcription service, and each audio file was transcribed. Transcription files were saved on a secure computer and in the cloud-based storage of the transcription company. The audio files from each school were listened to the first time to gain familiarization with the data, to compare the generated transcripts with the audio files to correct any mistakes, and to assign pseudonyms to each participant to protect their identities. A participant document was created in Microsoft Excel© summarizing the students and adult participants for each school with columns for name, pseudonym, gender, grade, and interests for the students; and name, pseudonym, gender, school role, and years of experience for the adults.

The transcripts for each school were read and reviewed a second time and open coding was conducted with notes and memos written about big ideas and researcher thoughts about reflections. Memos were used to synthesize the data into higher level meanings (Miles et al., 2014). The creation of memos and notes during data analysis provided an audit trail for the data analysis, which Creswell and Poth (2018) describe as a "validation strategy for documenting thinking processes that clarify understanding over time" (p. 188).

In preparation for the axial coding process, a file in Microsoft Excel© was created to serve as a code book (Appendix S), providing a means for locating information efficiently (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Student and adult transcript coding were kept in the same file but on different spreadsheets. The following columns were created to organize the emerging data for the student interview transcripts: research question number, code, state, school, group (services or non-services), person, and quote. The columns in the adult spreadsheet were the same with the exception of the group column.

"The process of data collection, data analysis, and report writing are not distinct steps in the process – they are interrelated and often go on simultaneously in a research project" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 185). As the transcripts were read and reviewed a third time, each research question was taken one at a time and axial coding was conducted. The audio files were also listened to again during the coding to listen for expression and emotion. Information was organized in the columns within the spreadsheet and important and interesting quotes were captured at the same time to possibly be used in the data report. For research question one, in vivo codes, codes derived directly from the data, were used as they emerged from the actual words of interview participants. For research questions two and three, codes were set before examining data, a priori coding, because of the nature of each question. Research question two focused on the existing codes of PYD level and PYD school actions, while research question three focused on the existing codes of services, opportunities, and supports for mental health and PYD.

To begin the process of transitioning codes to themes and sub-themes, the code column in the spreadsheet was sorted and common codes across all four school were organized together. This allowed me to see if codes were common across all four cases or not. The student and school staff coding was done separately and then compared and combined. Any major differences between the student and adult coding were noted and will be discussed as implications for practice in Chapter five. A new spreadsheet was created in the Excel© document and codes associated with only one or two schools were moved to this spreadsheet to be used in Chapter five to discuss implications for practice and possibilities for future research. Once the codes were determined to be consistent across the four schools and between students and school staff, transcripts were read a fourth time and the audio files were listened to again as codes were

organized into major themes and sub-themes. Two additional columns were added to the code book: major theme and sub-theme. Themes, also called categories, are “broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated together to form a common idea” (Croswell & Poth, 2018, p. 194).

School Documentation Data Analysis

The documents collected at each school were used to triangulate the emerging data for research questions one and two. The school documentation was utilized the most to answer research question three. After the themes emerged from the focus group interviews for research question three, I read through the documentation from each school carefully to substantiate and confirm the sub-themes that emerged from the themes of mental health and PYD services, opportunities, and supports implemented at the school. The reading of the school documents revealed certain services, opportunities, and supports not mentioned during focus group interviews and those emerging sub-themes, with rich description, were added to the code book spreadsheet.

School Observations Data Analysis

The notes and pictures taken during the field work were used to triangulate the emerging data from all three research questions. They were also used to provide additional rich, descriptive detail to certain themes and sub-themes that emerged.

Chapter 4 - **Results**

Profile of Schools

Kansas School One

Kansas School One is a 6-12 junior/senior high school located in the middle of a town with a population of 317 based on the 2010 Census. The school is part of the 2018 Gemini II cohort in the Kansas Can School Redesign Project. The school has a student population of 101 students with 65% qualifying for free and reduced lunch and 92% White and 6% Hispanic (KSDE, 2021). The five-year post-secondary success rate for the school between 2014-2018 was 59% and the 4-year cohort graduation rate in 2020 was 93.3% (KSDE, 2021).

According to U.S. Census: American Community Survey 2019 5-Year Estimates Data, in Kansas, 14.9% of students from households with children, come from single-parent households with a female as head of the household. In this community, that percentage is 32.6%. In Kansas, there are 12.7% of families with children in poverty. In this community, that percentage is 17%. The median family income is $75,976 in Kansas. In this community, the mean family income is $48,750. The major employers in the community involve educational and health services; arts, entertainment, and recreation; manufacturing, and retail trade. In Kansas, the educational attainment of a Bachelor's Degree or more among adults is 33.4%. Among the adults of this community, that number is 15% (United States Census Bureau, n.d.).

The school principal shared that people move to the small community for two main reasons: low rent and low police presence. He also indicated that he has witnessed a shift in the last five years at the school with more students coming from non-traditional households and many transient, or mobile, students. In response to the community not having many child care options, the school district implemented half day preschool for three and four-year-old children

with a half a day of child care. The district is currently proposing offering child care for children ages zero to three.

Kansas School Two

Kansas School Two is a 9-12 high school located in the middle of a town with a population of 10,295 based on the 2010 Census. The school is part of the 2017 Mercury 7 cohort in the Kansas Can School Redesign Project. The school has a student population of 525 students with 72.8% qualifying for free and reduced lunch and is the most diverse school within the study with a student body comprised of 52% White, 17% Hispanic, 17% Multi-Ethnic, 7% American Indian or Alaskan Native, and 6% Black (KSDE, 2021). The school achieved its highest graduation rate during the 2019-20 school year with 89%. The five -year post-secondary success rate for the school between 2014-2018 was 49% (KSDE, 2021).

According to U.S. Census: American Community Survey 2019 5-Year Estimates Data, 65% of households with children, represent a married-couple family in Kansas. In this community, that percentage is 48%. In Kansas, the educational attainment of a Bachelor's Degree or more among adults is 33.4%. Among the adults of this community, that number is 17.4%. The median family income in Kansas is $75,976. In this community the median family income is $43,000. The major employers in the community involve educational and health care services, manufacturing, and retail trade (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

The school principal, who has taught and coached at the school, shared that the community is a laid-back place where the expectations are low. He indicated there is a high level of poverty and a lot of families on government assistance. He also shared the following about his school:

> When I was here in the late 90s, the intensity just walking through the building was high. A lot of that was difference, it could have been racial, it could have been just a lot of different cliques. We don't really have that anymore, not saying it's nonexistent. I don't know if it'll ever go away. But I think a huge factor was the consolidation of elementary schools. Now students go through school together and they are not at those different locations.

West Virginia School One

West Virginia School One is a 9-12 high school located in an unincorporated town. The school opened in the 1980's as a result of the consolidation of two existing high schools. The closest incorporated town is six miles away and has a population of 406 according to the 2010 Census. The student body population is 368 students with 57.6% designated as low SES and 98% White. The school met or exceeded all standards on the West Virginia Schools Balanced Scorecard with the exception of Attendance during the 2019-20 school year. The school had an attendance rate of 88.75% for the 2019-20 school year (WVDE, 2021)

According to U.S. Census: American Community Survey 2019 5-Year Estimates Data and based on the data from the nearest incorporated town, educational attainment of a Bachelor's Degree or more among adults in West Virginia is 21%. Among the adults of this community, that number is 9%. The median family income in West Virginia is $59,607. In this community the median family income is $43,959. The major employers in the community involve educational and health care services; transportation and warehousing; professional services; and construction. In West Virginia, 52.8% of grandparents living with their own grandchildren under 18 years of age, are responsible for their grandchildren. In this community, that number is 100% (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

The school principal shared several thoughts on the culture of the rural area and people in which the school is embedded. Mr. Wilson said, “We deal with something every day here. We have a student who lost his home recently to flooding and is now homeless.” He shared the following about the biggest challenge for the school, “The biggest challenge is dealing with apathy, getting people to see the importance of getting an education and skills.” In speaking about the increase of services and supports now offered through the school district to students and families, Mr. Wilson wondered, “Have we went from being helpers to enablers?”

West Virginia School Two

West Virginia School Two is a 9-12 high school not located in a town. The school opened in the 1980’s as a result of the consolidation of two existing high schools. The closest incorporated town is 10 miles away and has a population of 705 according to the 2010 U.S. Census. The student body comprises of 374 students with 52.6% low SES and 99% White. The school met the 4-Year Graduation Rate/Cohort standard and exceeded the standard for post-secondary achievement for the 2019-20 school year on the West Virginia School Balanced Scorecard. The school partially met the 5-Year Graduation Rate/Cohort standard with 89% and did not meet the attendance rate standard at 86.39% (WVDE, 2021)

According to U.S. Census: American Community Survey 2019 5-Year Estimates Data and based on data from the closest incorporated town, 57% of households with children, represent a married-couple family in West Virginia. In this community, that percentage is 24%. In West Virginia, 15.2% of students come from single-parent households with a female as head of the household. In this community, that percentage is 42.7%. In West Virginia, the educational attainment of a Bachelor’s Degree or more among adults is 21%. Among the citizens of this community, that number is 3.4%. The median family income in West Virginia is $59,607. In this

community the median family income is $25,238. The major employers in the community involve educational and health care services; retail trade; and arts and entertainment. In West Virginia, 52.8% of grandparents living with their own grandchildren under 18 years of age, are responsible for their grandchildren. In this community, that number is 53.2% (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).

Profile of Students

A total of 16 students from two Kansas high schools and 19 students from two West Virginia high school participated in focus group interviews for this study. The 35 students across the case study were purposefully diverse. In order to protect the identity of the students, descriptors, such as grade, race, or activities, will not be included with the list of student pseudonyms for each school because they could reveal the identity of certain students. The student focus groups consisted of 24 females and 11 males. As far as grade level, there was one freshman, 13 sophomores, 18 juniors, and three seniors. The students were predominately White, but there were two Black students, one Multi-race student, and one Pacific Islander student. The students in each school were a mix of students who had needed and received social-emotional support at the school in the past and students who had not. The students in each school represented a mix of school involvement level. Some of the students were very active in their school, including student organizations, co-curricular activities, and extracurricular activities, while some did not participate in anything or very little. Some of the students in each school were enrolled in Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses while others were more strictly focused on academics and Advanced Placement (AP) courses.

The students participating in focus group interviews from Kansas School One were: Riley, Kasey, Tommy, Lacy, Kim, Samantha, Jerry, Michaela, and Arlee. The students

participating in focus group interviews from Kansas School Two were: Kyle, Sarah, John, Chris, Carrie, Ashley, and Mary. The students participating in focus group interviews from West Virginia School One were: Gina, Bailey, Andrew, Kristen, Ethan, Randee, Michelle, Betty, Mark, Carl, and Robert. The students participating in focus group interviews from West Virginia School Two were: Amy, Rene, Jan, Roger, Amber, Shawna, Erika, and Wanda.

Profile of Adults

A total of 10 Kansas school staff and 11 West Virginia school staff participated in adult focus group interviews. The following school staff participated in the focus group interviews: all four principals for each school; four school counselors; two CTE teachers; two social workers, two sports coaches; one Assistant Principal; one English teacher; one Spanish teacher, one Choir and Music teacher; one Career Specialist, one mental health counselor, and one district Student Services Coordinator. There were 13 female adults and eight male adults involved in the school staff focus group interviews. Years of experience in education among the group of school staff ranged from one to 33. Pseudonyms were used in place of real names to protect the identity of the school staff.

The adults participating in a focus group interview from Kansas School One were: Mrs. Love, Mrs. Starcher, Mrs. Grant, and Mr. Bliss. The adults participating in a focus group interview from Kansas School Two were: Mrs. Nester, Mrs. Marty, Mr. Lance, Mr. Hinkle, Mrs. Ray, and Mr. Mahan. The adults participating in a focus group interview from West Virginia School One were: Mr. Wilson, Mr. Smith, Mrs. Knotts, Mrs. Miller, and Mrs. Rawson. The adults participating in a focus group interview from West Virginia School Two were: Mrs. Flinn, Mr. Legg, Mrs. Lamb, Mrs. Staats, Mrs. Taylor, and Mr. Stone.

COVID-19

This study was not focused on the impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on mental health, because evidence suggests students were struggling with mental health before the pandemic. However, it was not the intent of this research to ignore its impact either. It is important to note that there was a major difference between the two schools in Kansas and the two in West Virginia. The two schools in Kansas had spent most of the 2020-21 school year in school conducting in-person classes. The two West Virginia schools spent most of the first semester and some of the second semester conducting remote learning and were not back to at least four day a week in-person instruction until early March.

During both the student and adult focus group interviews, the subject of COVID-19 did emerge. An effort was made to keep discussions on COVID-19 in their own contexts and to clarify certain remarks when necessary to keep comments about the impact of COVID-19 from influencing the other themes that emerged from the study. During focus group interviews, students and adults both agreed that COVID-19 did not create new social emotional issues for students, it just magnified existing conditions. The comments concerning COVID-19 were taken from the transcripts and coded separately to determine sub-themes. The following four COVID-19 sub-themes emerged: stress/anxiety; remote/online learning; lack of social interaction and connection; and decreased confidence.

Stress/Anxiety

Several of the students and the adults shared how COVID-19 added to the stress and anxiety students already had to begin with while others shared it did not negatively impact everyone. Robert shared the following:

> COVID-19 took a lot of stress off of me, as far as schooling and stuff like that around here. It made school 10 times easier for those few months. It was like we weren't here, and we didn't have to worry about it at the house either, and that just took a load off our shoulders.

Mark disagreed and said, “It made it a little harder for me.” Mrs. Flinn provided some insight into the different perspectives, “I think it has made the harder workers more anxious because they were always anxious to begin with, but it's made the more apathetic students more apathetic.” Mr. Stone said the following about the impact of COVID-19 on student anxiety, “I think it amplified it in a lot of kids.”

For many students, the increased anxiety and stress came in the form of school work and grades. Speaking of keeping her work caught up while at home, Shawna shared, “I feel like I couldn't get all my work done ever. There was not enough time in the day for sleeping and eating.” Erika, an academically conscientious student, provided detail about her typical day during remote learning, “Like when we were remote, literally I was waking up at like, seven, wasn't going to bed till like two or three in the morning, and my mom would bring me food. So, I wouldn't even leave my bed to do that.” Mr. Lance described students at his school the following way:

> Exhausted! I think this last year with COVID-19, they started out this semester, the school year, just wore out and stressed. A lot of kids when they went full remote, failed all their classes, and they come back and they have this pressure to catch up.

For some students, the return to in-person classes at the school brought on stress and anxiety. Mrs. Miller shared,” A lot of them that did come back, have since gone back to remote. They had so much anxiety when they returned.”

Remote/Online Learning

Some of the students and adults had specific things to share about how remote online learning negatively impacted students. Shawna personally shared, “COVID-19 and doing online work, it's really dragged me down.” Wanda provided some valuable insight into why many students struggle with remote learning, “You have to have your own motivation to get up from your own bed, and do your work.” Bailey said, “I just think that online school is hard on some kids, because when you're at home, you have other things you can do. And instead of sitting on your computer doing work, you'd rather play video games.”

Lack of Social Interaction and Connection

This sub-theme emerged from both the adult and student focus group transcripts. Mr. Smith said the following about students at his school, “With COVID-19, I think it made more of them more antisocial.” Kim personally shared, “I'll be really honest, this year, I feel like my connections with students in my class have deteriorated.” Mark shared:

> I think for basically, almost a year, everybody was kind of locked up in their houses. Maybe some kids didn’t get as much social interaction as they should and that caused depression and things like that. It's good to hang out with your friends and stuff, you know, and go places. For about a year, that wasn't a thing.

Making the connection between difficulties at home and the inability to attend school in-person, Shawna shared, “I feel like factors, like COVID-19 and not being able to get out from their family, which school was a way to get away from their family some, has had a domino effect for some students.”

Decreased Confidence

The students did not mention how COVID-19 impacted student confidence, but the adults did. Mr. Smith shared, “Confidence has been hit really hard with the COVID-19. And trying to get them back in a positive mindset on that, it's been a little bit of a struggle for some of them.” Mrs. Miller shared the following about student confidence:

> I think it's lower now than it has been in the past due to the events of the last year. That's one of the things that I've seen, even our better students struggling with. To perform at where they should be at the end of the 11th or 12th grade after missing a year of school. They’re really insecure, because they know they're not where they need to be.

Research Question One (Part 1)

The first research question sought to discover what factors students and school staff identify as contributors to mental health problems youth are experiencing and what specific mental health issues they believe students struggle with the most. This first part of the question focused more on students and school staff sharing their own perceptions of what causes mental health problems in the youth of today. The second part sought to know which mental health problems, such as anxiety or depression, students struggle with the most. Upon analysis of all the student and adult focus group transcriptions, five main themes emerged for the first part of the question about the factors contributing to poor mental health. Themes included: pressure, home life, technology, bullying, and stigma.

Results from the initial CES Depression (CES-D) and Positive Youth Development (PYD) student surveys from just the four schools in this study will be provided at appropriate times in the findings to support the data that emerged from the focus group interviews. The possible range of scores for the total depression score were zero to 60, with higher scores on each

question and a higher overall score indicating the presence of more depression. Higher scores on each PYD question and higher overall PYD scores indicate a stronger individual possession of that specific PYD construct.

Pressure

This was overwhelming the strongest and most consistent theme that emerged from the student transcripts. Various students from every school talked about the pressure they feel from multiple sources. This pressure from multiple sources is summed up well in the following quote from Betty, “It is stressful trying to be someone that everybody expects you to be: parents, students, media, everyone.” The theme of pressure did emerge from the adult transcripts but it was not as strong compared to student transcripts and no subthemes emerged. Mrs. Love explained why she believes students have pressure, “And I do think that the kids feel like they have to be successful, they do not want to fail.” Mr. Bliss shared, “When I was in sixth grade, or just even in high school, you didn't have any of this pressure. The layers kids today have to deal with, are much more. I don't know, it's just hard for them to navigate.”

Most students spoke of the pressure they feel from these outside sources, however, Kasey indicated that sometimes youth put the pressure on themselves, “They think they have to be perfect, because that's the image that everyone portrays them to be.” Amber said, “I think it is both. You put it on yourself and then other people might say something that causes pressure.” In coding for the overall pressure theme, the sources of pressure students felt from outside of themselves developed into four subthemes: parents, peers, school, and time management.

Parents

Several students expressed how youth today feel pressure from their parents. Both male and female students in the various focus group interviews discussed pressure from parents, yet

when it came to the pressure to perform well academically in school, only female students mentioned this as a source of pressure. Jan shared, “Well, for me personally, I, in my own ethnicity, my mother, she's very focused on education. So, I have a lot of pressure on me, from my parents.” The pressure to maintain or exceed the academic performance level of siblings was expressed by Shawna who said, “And my siblings are really smart too, well my sibling, she was really smart too, like, all AP classes. So, I'm looked upon like, I need to equal her or be better.” Riley expressed how she feels when she overhears her parents praise her sister for making good grades:

> For like me, my sister, I feel like she gets good grades, doesn’t even have to try. And so, I feel pressure to be like her, but I feel like I have to work harder than her, and so I get burned out trying to be like my sister. Who my parents, I see them praise her and stuff. I know they don't mean it. But like she does do a good job. And so, she should get praise. But I kind of want that same feeling from them.

In addition to the pressure of performing well in school, several students described the pressure students feel when parents expect them to act and think a certain way about life or their future. Carl explained this type of pressure the following way, “Like parents expecting more of their kids or putting pressure on their kids, and just wanting something for them that the child doesn't want, that's really prevalent around here.” A more specific example of this type of parental pressure was shared by Robert who said, “I've known girls that their moms don't even let them out of the house without doing a full face and makeup, and that mentally bothers a girl, that's bad.” Along this same line of sharing, Betty said, “It could affect bad because a lot of mothers do put a lot of pressure on their daughters especially, to act a certain way, like to be friends with certain few people.”

One additional form of parental pressure students identified involved the expectation or necessity of taking on additional responsibilities at home. Roger described this pressure the following way, “The external factors also, like work, parents breathing down your neck. Maybe you have to be like a second parent at your house. Like maybe you have to watch your younger siblings or something.”

Peers

Peer pressure has been an issue for youth for several generations. Today’s youth are no different than generations of youth before them, yet they have their own unique experiences and ways of processing interactions with their peers. The pressure of fitting in with peers at school emerged from the various interviews. Amy described her inner struggle dealing with the pressure from peers the following way, “Trying to fit in with everyone else, to not get picked on, bullied. Sitting there thinking, Am I too big? Am I my too thin? Are they going to stare at me differently if I wear this or that?” Jerry made it clear how difficult it can be to fit in with one’s peers when one is different or has different interests:

> I grew up in a home, that really didn’t have a computer or Internet. And trying to fit in with some of the kids that do have that stuff, it's hard. Because they think you got to be 24-7 on the Internet and stuff and talk to them, and you can't.

It also became clear during the interviews, that many students feel the pressure to be popular among their peers. Riley described this pressure by saying, “There's pressure to be the best, you know, you got the popular people. And if you're not like them, then you are alone at school and stuff like that.” Jan described the pressure of discovering one’s own identity in the school environment among all types of people by saying:

> There are some that are super perfect valedictorian materials. And then there's some that just don't care about the world. And it's like, you want to mellow yourself out so you can fit in with everybody, but also still figure out who you want to be in life.

Carl spoke specifically about the peer pressure of acceptance boys experience by saying, "For the boys the pressure is from the friend group. Like it is from the friends not from the parents. Like, maybe to drink or chew Skoal, do drugs. If you don't do that, you're not one of the boys."

This concern and weariness to be popular among peers and to wonder if one is good enough, was also supported by the results of the CES-D and PYD survey students took at all four schools. The second highest scoring question on the CES-D portion of the survey was the question, "I felt I was just as good as other people" with a mean of 1.55. The question, "I am popular with others my age" was one of the lowest scoring questions on the PYD portion of the survey, with a mean of 2.71.

School

The pressure students feel from their school, centered around the concepts of class workload, expectations, and grades. Speaking about being overloaded with school work, Jerry said, "There is a lot of school stress involving a lot of assignments and kids staying up late and stuff. It makes it difficult in school for them." Sarah spoke more specifically about the frustration she experienced in one of her classes:

> It's kind of like my seventh hour, English. She gives us a lot of work. And I've asked her to like explain it differently to me. But every time she does it, like every time I asked her, she's like, look on Google Classroom. But that doesn't really help. She's kind of hard.

> Some teachers don't know how to explain to the students or just don't care to explain to the students.

John agreed with Sarah and said, “You know, a lot of teachers do struggle with explaining things in a way that makes sense to students. Because their way of thinking is, well I understand, and so the students must obviously understand. It's not always the case.”

Students feel pressure from expectations adults place on them in school. Kasey shared, “The teachers expect the best of everyone. But there's not a lot of times that the teacher will sit down and be like, ‘Hey, are you doing okay?’” Amy shared a more specific thought on classroom expectations, “They're like, well, your Honors kids, you should get this because you're in Honors. You all are the good class. And I'm like, wait a minute.” Jan’s thoughts on the pressure of expectations focused more on life after high school:

> We're close to the age of graduation where they say after you leave high school, you're going to have to go ahead and decide what job, where you want to go to college. You have to basically plan your whole life out before graduation. Because older people think that once you graduate, you're going to amount to nothing if you don't have a certain plan.

The pressure to perform well on high-stakes exams and to earn good grades was felt by several students. Erika shared:

> AP Biology started with, okay, here's a big list on the side of the whiteboard you need to know. And it's like, if you don't know these by the end of the year you are not going to pass the test. And so, everything since day one has been stressed on passing this test. And I hate it!

Roger’s thoughts combined the pressure of earning good grades with the expectations of others:

> I'd say the pressure of being perfect. Like you have to be a straight A student. You have to do this, you have to do that, in order to go to college and be successful in life. They're always breathing down your neck that you have to be the best of the best and not slip up whatsoever, or you're the worse.

Roger further said, "Checking your grades every day is not a mentally healthy thing to do."

Time Management

Several students touched on the challenge they have of managing their time because of additional obligations they have after school. Michelle said, "You have to learn how to manage your time." Bailey added, "I agree with that, as soon as I leave school at the end of the day, I have like an hour and then I go to work and I work like seven hours a day." For several students, the pressures of school collided with either their job or extracurricular activities after school. Ashley said, "People that have work after school, high schoolers, they have to juggle school and work." Amy shared her own personal experience:

> I got my job when I was 15. I work at McDonalds and I hate that place. I had to take a school interest so I could start passing school again. I struggled. I worked four days a week. And then I had practice, and now I have track. Now I have competitions again. So, I really needed that work release.

Roger's experience illustrates how the pressure sub-themes of parents, school, and time management are interconnected:

> My dad is big on, once you turn 16, you have to have a job. Got to pay for this, got to pay for that. So, I have to have it, but I'm glad that I have it because I now have my own money. But it takes a lot out of me because I have homework during the week. And then I have to go to work on the weekends. If I don't get my homework done, I have to go

to work and do homework. It's just a lot. I worked three days a week. And now I have to work two because of the homework.

Home Life

The impact of a student's home life on mental health was touched on by several students in all four schools. Unlike with the pressure theme, students were less open with providing detail when discussing this theme. However, this was the strongest theme that emerged from the adult transcripts and they were more comfortable providing details. Michaela shared, "A lot of, most of us have good homes. But there's a lot of us that don't." The following four sub-themes under home life emerged from the coding of the student interview transcripts: trauma, drugs, poverty, family structure. Mrs. Love summed up several of the sub-themes when she said:

> I think a lot of it has to do with the change in society itself. When I started, parents were not divorced. And now there's a lot of separation of the family, there's a lot of economical struggles. And there's more pressure for the kids to provide for homes. Things that I've never had to deal with, that they're dealing with.

Trauma

Trauma can take on many forms. In most instances, students were unable to provide a description of the trauma occurring in homes. Chris said, "Sometimes it can be like the environment at your home. Like, you can be around bad things and see bad stuff. And it can really affect, you know, how you think and how you walk your lifestyle." Bailey was a little more descriptive, "A lot of things that could cause mental health like, I don't know, parents being rough on the kids, and just a lot of things that can go on at home that you don't know about at school." When details of trauma did emerge, it consisted of abuse and loss. Bailey further shared, "And then there's some parents that are abusive and things like that. You never know what's

going on behind closed doors." Sarah referred to the trauma of loss, "Like losing somebody that's like really close to you. It can really affect some kids in school."

It was clear that all of the adults realized many students were experiencing traumatic events in their home. Mrs. Miller said, "And things that they're not ready for, or really mature enough to know or handle, or see, I think they're seeing at a really young age." Mrs. Flinn shared a profound thought:

> A lot of our kids, like we talked about earlier, only see one way of life. So even when they try to do something better for themselves, they get told at home, 'Oh, you think you're better because you want to go to college? Oh, you think you're better because you want to make all these good grades and not help us out at home? That's not who we are.' So, I think they have identity problems in that way too.

Drugs

Drug abuse and addiction is at an epidemic level in many rural areas across this country. Drug abuse is felt the greatest by the family. Too many students are dealing with the ramifications of a parent addicted to drugs. Although home life was a theme that emerged from all four schools, only students in the two West Virginia schools spoke specifically about drug abuse. Bailey was direct, "Well, there's some parents that abuse alcohol and drugs." Shawna described the shifting of roles in the home due to drugs, "There are kids who have to like, help their parents take care of stuff. Like if their parents are on drugs or something. I feel like it happens a lot around here." Sadly, the drug epidemic has become part of the culture of some rural communities. About this phenomenon, Betty shared, "It is really overlooked, because here, it is normal… almost."

Poverty

This study is focused on low SES schools, so poverty is a reality for many of the students attending the four schools in this study. However, even though this sub-theme emerged in the coding, students said very little about it. Bailey said, “Some parents don’t work. Some parents just struggle.” When referring to sources of stress in the home, Shawna shared, “Like sickness in the family a lot, and money troubles.”

Family Structure

Trauma, drugs, and poverty have caused the family structure of many homes to change drastically. The percentage of grandparents having to raise children has drastically risen with the increase of trauma and drug abuse in the home. Mark emphatically said:

> I don't know the percentage rates, but I remember a teacher last year said something about the percentage of kids who don't even have parents, from like drugs and stuff. You know, that's got to take a huge toll. I mean, I got both my parents, but, you know, for a kid who don't, I mean, I just can't imagine how hard it would be.

Carl supported what Mark said and added, “Our county has the second highest rate of kids living with grandparents in the state.” Carl went further with his thoughts on grandparents raising children, “You see more of that than you do like in other places. Like in more urban areas, you probably see more single parent households. Here you see more grandparent households.” Mark spoke of the repercussions of not having biological parents in the home, “Kids will pick up bad habits because they don't have that father figure or that mother figure, somebody to really teach them. Like kids, they don't want to listen to their maw maws and papaws.”

Where students were not as quick to point to parents being a source of the problem, the adults were. Mrs. Nester bluntly said, “Parents don’t parent.” Mr. Stone shared, “We have a large number of kids here whose parents are addicted to drugs.” Mrs. Lamb said:

> Well, in our area, we have more than half of our kids being raised by someone other than the parent. In some instances, those parents have overdosed, they're in jail. Usually it has something to do with, you know, some kind of drug related thing because we have the opioid crisis. And I just don't think in a lot of instances, our grandparents are equipped to raise teenagers, especially with social media.

Betty shared how difficult it can be for some students to escape the stigma associated with the negative behaviors of their parents, “Someone will say, ‘Oh, you're so and so's kid.’ And then they're almost pushed into that view of like, their parents, what their parent was. They feel like they can't escape that.” On somewhat of a lighter note, the family structure can also be altered by siblings going to college or getting married. This shift in family dynamics can be difficult and challenging for many young people. Erika personally shared, “Siblings going to college, moving out, getting married. And like being the only kid left in your house. It just sucks. It’s horrible.”

Technology

Technology is always evolving and advancing in our world and in our schools. Although technology has simplified many areas of life and made production more efficient, there have been some unintended consequences born out of the constant and rapid changes technology brings. Perhaps youth, who are physiologically, mentally, and emotionally still developing during adolescence, have been the most dramatically impacted by some of the unintended consequences. When discussing the impact of technology on student mental health, students and

school staff focused on three main areas: social media, electronic communication, and school-based technology.

Social Media

Interestingly, it took a while during the focus group interviews with students, for social media to be brought out as a factor impacting student mental health. During one interview, Kasey even said, “I cannot believe we haven’t brought this up yet, but social media.” Students connected social media to other main themes. For example, Ashley referred to the pressure she feels, “I think technology is always changing. And then of course, all the social media stuff, so everyone feels the pressure to post stuff and get a lot of views and a lot of likes.” Mary indicated how social media has caused a decline in self-confidence:

> I would say self-confidence. I feel like it's declining a lot more recently since you know, with obviously social media and everything. People see others in this positive way and don't realize that you know, everyone has negatives in their life. They just don't see that as much now, since you can like, you know, hide yourself behind a screen.

Mrs. Lamb connected social media to the self-worth of students, “We have so many kids who get their sense of self-worth by what they see on social media.”

Electronic Communication

The students differentiated between the outcomes of the interactions that take place on social media platforms and the basic consequences of communicating electronically compared to face-to-face. Mark spoke of the social repercussions of electronic communication, “And I feel also like on a computer and technology, it's a whole lot easier to say something on there than it would be like face to face so everybody feels like they have an easier way out.”

Kim elaborated on the social, physiological, and mental consequences of communicating electronically:

> So particularly, I think electronic communication has caused a difference in mental health considerably. I mean, like the fact that the stimuli are stimulated, like with messages. The fact that we have to depend on nonverbal cues through a device versus actually talking to people and making real connections, causes some confusion in the brain. I think that because we've grown up in this sphere of technology, that it's become difficult for us to learn coping mechanisms, how to sleep properly, how to maintain stress, just in this generation in general.

Mrs. Miller's comments aligned with student thoughts on electronic communication:

> It leads to lack of communication at home, and then their lack of communication skills, when they do enter, face to face situations or problems, for example, they don't know how to resolve them, they have no problem-solving skills. And it's so much easier to say something mean, or something harsh, that you wouldn't say to someone's face. And then when they do come face to face and have to face those consequences, then that is where they really struggle.

School-based Technology

The thoughts on electronic and online communication took an interesting turn when students began discussing the intersection of technology and the school. Betty shared, "When you are used to doing everything online with technology, then you have to be like in groups and actually out in public, it can be nerve racking for some people." Samantha spoke of the distraction technology can cause during school:

> A lot of our stress can come from technology and social media. How often do we sit in class and email back and forth with each other, even somebody who's sitting next to us, rather than do our work? I think that some of our stress, a lot of our stress, we bring upon ourselves.

Roger had some strong words concerning technology use, “You can't just go completely go off the grid these days. If we do, we're going to fail school. Everything's online at our school. If they have a problem with us being on our phones, why did they build everything around technology?” Mrs. Ray shared the following about phone use in school, “I hate phones in the school building, they don't belong in the classroom. But their excuse is that they have to use them to get their homework assignments and check progress.”

Bullying

Many programs and interventions have been implemented in schools to address bullying. Yet, bullying was mentioned as a factor in poor mental health by students in all four schools. However, this theme did not emerge from the adult interviews. Bullying was never mentioned as a factor contributing to poor mental health in students by any adult in any school when asked about the factors contributing to poor mental health in students. Some adults did mention bullying during the focus group interviews, but it was in a different context and linked to social media. The following three bullying sub-themes emerged from the coding of transcripts from the student interviews: difference, joking, and judging.

Difference

Students were very open about who in their school is bullied and who does the bullying. Being different in a rural school can be a challenge for many students. Sarah shared, “Most of the kids that usually sit alone that are quiet, and have like anxiety in talking with people, they

mainly get picked on. Or the kids that usually don't have like, the nicest clothes." Jan opened up about her experience of being a different race in a predominately White school and community:

> I feel like specifically, for me, ever since I was growing up, I've had to deal with like, certain racial senses. And people would say names. But I feel like also going to high school, there's only maybe a group of five or ten students here that are racially different. Because there is you know, a lot of similar White people, not being racist. And it's just, it's so difficult. But at the same time, there's a lot of kids at the school that are activists, kind of like, who will take care of you and make sure that you're not bullied or anything.

Students who identified as a race other than White on the CES-D survey, scored an average of 3.44 points higher than White students indicating a higher level of depression.

Arlee shared her experience of when she moved from a large urban school to a small rural school, "I was called down because I'm from the city. I was told I was like a dying puppy that just got kicked under a porch and died." Jan shared this insightful comment, "I feel like rural schools are the most like, bullying places, because it's such a small place where everyone knows everyone and everyone knows everything." John was quick to point out who does most of the bullying in his school, "All the boys are definitely cool with each other. And girls on the other hand, there mean, like really, really mean."

Joking

It is obvious hurtful words impact the mental and emotional health of students. John said it best, "Words really make, like a huge impact." Kasey said, "And that's also peers. Like, you may be making fun of somebody all the time , and you don't realize how much that actually gets to people." Riley agreed with Kasey and added, "Like in my class, it happens to me all the time,

and like, I can handle it, but it just gets annoying. And like, if they did that to the wrong person, what would be the outcome?" Students shared that in addition to hurtful joking taking place face to face in school, it also happens on social media. Bailey shared, "I've seen it happen on, like, social media. Just people commenting bad things on other people's posts or something. I see a lot of that, like on TikTok. And like, just saying mean stuff. I've seen that a lot."

Judging

In some instances, and for some students, the bullying took on the form of being judged by others. In speaking of her rural school, Jan said, "I feel like judging here is just so much easier." Sarah shared, "When they describe popular, it's like a group of kids that are more like into the sports, like the volleyball team. They tend to be a little rude towards kids that don't have enough money to play sports or anything." John felt there was a lot of judging in his school, "I don't know if it's like just in my grade, but I've noticed that some of the people that are considered popular, they definitely judge, like a lot of judging, silently or verbal. It's definitely there."

Stigma

One of the struggles both adults and youth face in rural communities and schools is overcoming the stigma associated with having mental health issues. There are many people who still do not believe it is a real problem and even more who believe it is a sign of weakness. The adults did not shy away from acknowledging that there is still a stigma to mental health that must be addressed. Mrs. Grant said the following about mental health concerns in her school, "I think like there's still a stigma behind it, they're not really opening themselves up to it being a real thing." Mrs. Love realized that many students hide their true feelings because of this stigma, "I think we have a lot of students that hide what they are truly feeling. I think some of it goes back

to they don't feel like they're successful, if they have those feelings. And so, they don't know how to deal with that." Mr. Bliss shared how his community is another source of the stigma around mental health, "And we're battling some community. You know, the rural versus urban. This rural, older community is one that's shrouded in pride, many do not feel we have a problem." Three sub-themes of stigma emerged from student and adult transcripts: parents, peers, and school staff.

Parents

Amy personally shared, "Because back then, like, my mom's age range, they didn't believe in mental health and stuff like that. My mom is like, iffy on that now. She has had two kids institutionalized so like, she's still iffy on it." Jan was more direct:

> My parents don't believe in it at all. And like, one time when I had a really rough time, they were so rough on me about it. So, like, I can never talk to them. And it's hard to talk to my friends because I tell them my emotions a lot, and I feel like it's just a burden. So, I like to keep stuff to myself. But then, you know, once you're done with your sadness, and all that, and then school is just, it's all a lot.

Wanda shared a similar experience about her parents, "So that was like my parents. They think depression, anxiety, they hear about it now, because it's out there, but they think it's all fake. It is what they think, so like, I can't talk to them. So, I just don't."

Peers

Mental health is challenging for students to talk about with their peers. Many students lack the maturity and understanding to know what to say and how to help, and there is a real fear of being judged. Samantha opened up about her own struggles dealing with this lack of understanding and stigma:

> I think that they're always willing to bring it up as a joke. But I think seriously, like, I personally struggle with mental health. And so, if I, like even here in this group, I don't know that I would be completely comfortable opening up and saying, I struggle with this or that, not because you're here, but because some of the students like, it's not against anybody here, it's almost like there's a distrust to be serious.

Lacy shared the following about how many students deal with their feelings:

> They'll hide it. And they'll be like, trying just to find somebody to help them, but they won't say that they need help. And I think that happens a lot of times because they're afraid of what people will think. Because like, our age group is so judgmental. And then everybody is so worried about what everyone else thinks about them.

Lacy further shared, " I know several people who do struggle mentally and are suicidal. They don't talk about it. Obviously, that goes back to the whole pressure thing of like, wanting to not look bad. And nobody, like, talks about it besides jokes." Shawna shared a unique perspective of what can happen when peers see you leaving the social worker's office at school, "Like, if you are out of class, and like at the social worker's office or something. The kids will be like, 'oh, what's up with her family and all that?'"

School Staff

Students identified parents and peers as sources of stigma. The adults identified these two as well, but also revealed that it can also come from certain adults in the school. Mrs. Starcher shared the following about what happens with certain adults when students reveal they are struggling mentally, "I think some of our parents and probably some of our staff as well, might consider the students soft. The student's emotions won't be validated. 'You're a kid, your

emotions don't matter. It's not real.'" Mr. Bliss added, "Yeah, it's unfortunate that we do have staff like that."

Research Question One (Part 2)

The second part of the first research question wanted to know what students and school staff would identify as the major mental health issues with which students struggle with the most. Since most students are not abreast of the clinical diagnoses of mental health problems and even some of the symptomology, their answers to the question, "How would you describe the overall mental health of students at your school?" and the follow-up probe of, "What do students struggle with the most at your school?" speak of specific conditions, but the detail is lacking. Therefore, no sub-themes emerged from the major themes. The school staff were able to provide some additional details to some of the conditions. Some of the students did connect the mental health problems back to one or more of the factors they identified as contributing to poor mental health in students. The major mental health problems that did emerge as themes included: anxiety, depression, stress, lack of healthy coping, and suicidal comments.

Anxiety

Some of the symptoms of anxiety include: feeling nervous, restless, or tense; feeling weak or tired; trouble concentrating or thinking about anything other than the present worry; and having difficulty controlling worry (Litin, 2018). The highest scoring question on the CES-D survey was, "I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing" with a mean of 1.81. Most students were able to identify anxiety as a problem, but did not elaborate in their description. For example, Arlee said, "There is a lot of anxiety. Like I said, I come from a big school, I'm used to seeing people with some anxiety, but I guess I've never seen this much of it." Mr. Hinkle said the following about his students, "Anxiety is a huge thing." Some of the students connected the

anxiety to a certain cause, such as home life and pressure. Erika spoke of the anxiety students experience this way, “It's usually from like something with family.” John said, “Around this age, a lot of students normally gain like depression and really anxious symptoms, stuff like that. Especially in high school, where the societal standard really matters, where you stand. And popularity too.”

Depression

Some of the symptoms of depression include: feelings of sadness; angry outbursts, irritability or frustration, even over small matters; loss of interest or pleasure in most or all normal activities; sleep disturbances; tiredness and lack of energy; reduced appetite; and feelings of worthlessness (Litin, 2018). The third highest scoring question on the CES-D survey was, “My sleep is restless”, with a mean of 1.51. Once again, most students were able to identify depression as an issue some students experience, but did not elaborate much. Shawna said, “It’s anxiety here, and depression.” Carrie provided a little more detail, “Some struggle with depression, body image issues and stuff like that.” Bailey was a little more upbeat about the depression at her school, “I can say that there's a few people that might be depressed or something, but most overall, though, I would say everyone is pretty good about mental health.” Amy had the most to say about depression, “And then that's another reason why our grades decline and stuff. Because whenever you're in a really depressive state, you don't want to do anything.”

A very interesting point was made by Shawna concerning the anxiety and depression that student athletes have:

> To be honest, anyone who's a student athlete has anxiety or depression. We love what we do, but it's like so stressful because you try to balance it with everything else you are

> doing. If you have a bad day at practice, you don't want to go home and do your homework.

This point was supported by results from the CES-D survey which indicated that student athletes (*n*=49) had a mean depression score of 25.02 and non-athletes (*n*=25) had a mean depression score of 20.08. Throughout the discussions with students about student mental health, various gender and grade specific points were made. Results of the CES-D survey indicated that female students (*n*=42) had a mean score of 27.02, male students (*n*=30) had a mean score of 17.57, and non-binary students (*n*=1) had mean score of 53.00. As far as the comparison between student grade level, sophomores (*n*=39) had a mean score of 24.62 and juniors (*n*=34) had a mean score of 21.53.

Stress

Stress takes a toll on the body, mood, and behavior. Stress can lead to anxiety, lack of motivation or focus, irritability, feeling overwhelmed, and depression. The impact on one's mood can lead to unhealthy behaviors such as, overeating, angry outbursts, drug or alcohol misuse, tobacco use, and social withdrawal (Litin, 2018). Student comments about stress were directly connected to their school work and grades. Carrie said:

> Some students are overwhelmed with work and it makes them feel stressed and like they can't do it. And then with the due dates they have, they feel like they have to rush to get it in. And then when they rush, they don't get a good grade. So, then they have to worry about the bad grade that they have in that class.

Mary agreed with Carrie and said, "When you're in school, you're constantly thinking about all your assignments. When you go home, you still have all these things you have to do for it. So, it's like you never catch a break from all the school work." Jerry shared a similar thought,

> I see, like, a lot of stress grind, like, teachers assign assignments on a daily basis. And there's like seven classes here. That's like a seven to ten assignments a day, depending on how many assignments the teachers assign, and there's that grind. We got to get that done, got to get that done. And then you go home and you got to do stuff at home. That just compiles on to that and there's just like this grind, got to do this, got to do that, all that stuff.

Amy spoke of what happens at school when a student is overwhelmed with stress:

> Also, when you have that much stress, that's how kids lash out and stuff in our school. That's how you get fights. That's how you get aggravation. Your mental health just plummets because you have everyone trying to push stuff on you and you already have so much that you can barely handle yourself.

Lack of Healthy Coping

Developing healthy coping mechanisms is critical to a healthy transition from adolescence to adulthood. Unfortunately, when youth are unable to get the help and support they need to process their anxiety, depression, and stress, unhealthy ways to cope with life and situations develop. The adults had the most to say about this theme. Mr. Bliss shared:

> And there's just this helplessness, this inability to make it past a roadblock. We call it learned helplessness. The inability to cope. Just literally, there's a challenge that's put in front of them, and the majority of kids right now, it seems, like your successful ones can navigate those waters, but a lot of them can't.

Mrs. Flinn provided more specific thoughts on why she believes students struggle to cope:

> I think with their feelings, they're disconnected from the things they see online, because

> that's not real. They're disconnected from the things they see at home, because they don't want that to be real. They just bottle everything up until they can't deal with it.

Two major types of unhealthy coping that emerged in this study: joking about feelings and risk-taking behaviors. Kim shared:

> Like in my classes, people that have had like really terrible backstories, like parents being gone or something else, what they'll do instead of like addressing it or getting help, they'll joke about it. And so, they'll just up front say, "oh yeah, this is happening," joking about it. They'll say that in classes with teachers around, they'll say that with students around. I think this is kind of just how everybody does it.

Kasey had similar thoughts about joking instead of coping, "And I think a lot of kids in our school, cope with joking about things. They will make jokes like, 'Oh, I just want to kill myself. I don't want to be here.'" Mrs. Staats said, "Coping skills, they don't know how to cope with anything. I think they really just don't know how to deal with a lot. Like they don't know how to actually feel anything fully. They laugh it off."

Some students spoke specifically about certain behaviors students will adopt to cope with their mental health struggles. Mark shared, "That is what a lot of kids run to now. I got a problem, I can go vape or something like to make me feel better. Yeah. That can't be good." Amy did not share anything specific, like vaping, but did link risk-taking behavior to being overly stressed:

> You have a kid that is overly stressed, it's going to force them to want to do something bad to take away and calm them down. That's what people don't understand. Whenever you're pushed to the limit, you just want to do something at that point to make yourself feel free or to have that feeling of freedom and control over your life again.

Suicidal Comments

Both the states of Kansas and West Virginia have signed into law, the Jason Flatt Act (The Jason Foundation, n.d.). The major components of this law require suicide prevention training for school district personnel. Students in the two West Virginia schools mentioned receiving information about suicide during school assemblies. Bailey shared, “They have people come in talk about depression and like, suicide and stuff.” Students in the two Kansas schools did not mention receiving suicide prevention information, but did express concerns they have about how students joke about suicide or make comments on social media. Samantha shared:

> Yeah, it's not uncommon to hear a kid say, well, “I'm going to go kill myself,” just because a teacher said something they didn't like. They're not being serious at all. They're just joking, because they think it's funny, not realizing that for many people, it's not at all.

Kasey emotionally shared the following about hearing jokes about suicide in her school, “But like sometimes you don't know if that's a joke. Like you don't know if they're being for real or if it's really a joke, our suicide jokes here are bad! That's honestly, what's worse here.” Kasey’s emotion came from a real place as she went on to share:

> Okay, so my sister is a teacher. And at her school, one of her students actually just committed suicide. And she was a really great kid involved with so much. You know, definitely, obviously, it was never expected. But I mean, she was great athlete, super nice, seemed really happy. And it just, I think it hit home for a lot of the people and just, I'd say pressure, I think that must have been what it was, I don't know. It's just kind of crazy that those things happen.

Several students mentioned how they see comments about suicide on the social media pages of students. Carrie shared, “Like my sophomore class, I would say is not very good. I see what most of them post on social media. They post stuff like, they don't want to be here no more and stuff like that, like their life’s not doing good.” The following was Ashley’s response to how she feels when she views social media posts such as these, “It makes me want to help them. Because I want to help people. So, when I see that kind of stuff, I always ask them, ‘What’s going on and how can I help?’”

Research Question Two

The second research question centered around students and school staff describing the levels of the six constructs of PYD: confidence, competence, connection, character, compassion/caring, and contribution, of students in their school and how their school works to build and develop these characteristics. Each of the six PYD constructs were divided into two major themes, student level and school actions. Sub-themes emerged from both the student level and school actions for each PYD construct.

Confidence – Student Level

Confidence is defined as the perception that one can achieve desired goals through one’s actions (Lerner, 2007). The PYD construct of confidence centers around the appearance, self-worth, and positive identity of an individual (Geldhof et al., 2014). When students and school staff were asked about the level of confidence among students in their school, the following three sub-themes emerged: varies with student, linked to academics, and self-identity and worth. Confidence was the second lowest scoring construct on the PYD survey, with a mean score of 61.01.

Varies with Student

In describing the overall confidence of students in their school, many students discussed how it all depends on the student. Shawna was very direct, “I have zero confidence!” Carl indicated he is confident but realizes many students are not:

> I say like, it varies between persons, because like, there's guys like me, I have a lot of confidence. There's some people out there, I mean, they think they're the dumbest. They don't think that they're athletic enough. Like there's people that won't try out for basketball teams, even though they like the sport because they don't feel good enough. So, I feel like it varies between students here.

Even though it is considered part of the competence construct on the PYD survey, the question, “I am better than others my age at sports” did receive one of the lowest scores with a mean of 2.47. The adults in each school realized, just like the students, that confidence varies between students. Just like the students, the adults indicated that overall, confidence is a PYD construct in which many students struggle. Mr. Hinkle was more pointed in his comments, “It's a huge problem here, lack of confidence. And I think a lot of the things that we're doing, social emotional lessons, I think it helps those kids get that insight. But we can't get them to take risks, try new things.”

Some students pointed to the fact that confidence can be strong or weak within certain grade levels in a school. Kim shared:

> I feel like my junior class has a lot of confident people. I come from a big group of leaders that have strong beliefs for their future, like future career paths. It's just always been that way. Whereas I feel like their sophomore class is a little less confident.

There was a slight difference on the PYD survey that supports the thought that confidence develops with maturity as the overall mean score of confidence for sophomores (*n*=41) was 60.33 and for juniors (*n*=35) was 61.81.

Mark linked lack of confidence in an individual back to the family structure of the student, “Confidence goes back to the parent thing. A lot of kids will not come to school confident. It's easy for me and you to be confident, because we have two parents that taught us to be that way.” Mr. Lance said, “A lot of that comes from home environment, too. They don't have the confidence from their own parents or people who are in the household that are living in a poor environment, or just poverty in general, it's hard to have confidence.”

Linked to Academics

Students made many connections between the confidence of students and academic endeavors, while the adults did not. Jerry said, “I would say there's some confidence, but, it depends on what they're doing. If it's like a test, there's low confidence there.” Amber discussed how doing poorly on a test can affect confidence, “If you had confidence that you're going to pass the test, and you completely fail it, your confidence is completely down the toilet.” Andrew was more specific about subject matter, “It depends on the class you are in too. Well, I'm very confident in math, math is my best subject, but English, I just lose it all.”

It was obvious how important grades are for many students. Erika spoke of how her grades impacted her confidence, “I got my first "B” my Freshman year because I didn't want to change my shoes for gym, and that's the first "B" I've ever gotten in my life. So, it was like a big thing.” Shawna shared, “I feel like I'm looked upon like I am supposed to have a good grade. So, when I get them, I'm like, okay, well, that's normal. But I'm not proud of myself after I do it.” Roger shared an interesting perspective:

> Well, personally, like how we're in the smart class, AP class, or whatever. If we have confidence that we're like, smart or whatever, you know, it's like, "oh, you're just big headed. Why do you think you're better than everybody else? Are you a know it all or something?" It is like you are not allowed to have confidence, sometimes.

John connected student confidence to having plans for one's future, "Some students already have like college plans and have it all figured out. They're doing really good for themselves. Other students are barely making it through 11th grade."

Self-Identity and Worth

Many students shared how youth struggle with confidence because they are still trying to discover who they are, and to even like themselves. Ashley shared, "I feel like a lot of people are still looking for that confidence. Like they're still trying to figure out who they are and how to love themselves." Mary added, "I feel like it's hard for any high schooler. They feel like they need to look good in other people's eyes. Like they don't realize that it's okay if other people don't like who you are, as long as you love yourself." Bailey shared how this lack of self-love comes out in the form of negative self-talk, "I guess you can hear a lot of people pick at themselves. I hear a lot of people do that." Carrie shared, "Like more students are trying to figure out like, what style they like to wear, what their sexuality is, and how to love themselves. To not care what anybody else has to say about them."

For some of the girls, positive identity and self-worth were strongly connected to physical looks. Shawna personally shared, "I feel like my identity is how smart you are and how you look. That's about it." Jan shared how self-worth is impacted when youth compare themselves to others:

> We like to compare ourselves to other people, who in our minds, are so beautiful and perfect. And I feel like sometimes if we look at ourselves too much, we lose confidence. Because we want to look a certain way. Because that person, let's say, they get more attention. They get more people to like them, so you want to be them. And then if you're not that, then you feel like you're nothing and your self-worth just goes down.

Mrs. Starcher touched on the self-worth component of confidence, "I think the overall positive self-worth, I think that might be a different depiction or story. I see it a lot in classes, just like negative self-talk, and they think it's normal." Mr. Wilson believes, "Social media has really hurt confidence in people. People airbrush their pictures."

One of the lowest scoring questions on the PYD survey was, "I am good looking", with a mean score of 2.47. The question, "I really like the way I look" was not much higher with mean score of 2.66. There was stark difference in confidence between the genders. Male students (n=32) had a mean confidence score of 68.85, female students (n=42) had a mean confidence score of 55.48, and non-binary students (n=1) had a mean confidence score of 20.00.

Confidence – School Actions

Students and school staff were asked to identify what their school does to build and develop confidence in students. It was apparent that school staff are aware of the need to build student confidence. As principal of his school, Mr. Stone shared his awareness of the need for his school to be more intentional in addressing student confidence, "Well as the principal, I think that's an area that we need to work on. That's one of the things that keeps coming up. I mean, it's developing student leadership, developing new skills to promote confidence." Two sub-themes emerged: words of affirmation and encouragement from adults, and diverse opportunities.

Words of Affirmation and Encouragement from Adults

Just as hurtful words can have a negative impact on students, affirming and encouraging words from adults and peers can have a positive effect. The adults in a school should never underestimate the power of their words. Jerry shared, “I'd say the faculty has a big part in that. They encourage you to do your best and feel confident in yourself. Try to do the best at everything you do.” Speaking of teachers and coaches at his school, Carl said, “They don't like, ‘I can't.’ Like they don't let you say, ‘I can't.’ They don't want you to not do something because you don't know how.”

Students discussed how important it is for adults in the school to notice when students need affirmed and encouraged and then to act upon it. Mark shared, “And that goes back to our teachers too. If you come into class, and your kind of off, they'll take you to the side and talk to you, and they'll ask what's going on and stuff. You know, that helps.” Jan shared the following about one of her teachers, “If he can tell that you're not doing good, and you don't feel like you're going to do good on an exam. He will tell you that you're brilliant, that you got this, that you just need to work on some things.” The importance of affirmation and encouragement in the classroom resonated with many students. Bailey shared, “My math teacher, he's all the time saying, don't be upset over not knowing how to do some things in math. He said it's okay, we'll work together.” Kim said:

> Sometimes I feel like some people, when a test comes, they'll demean their self-worth by what their grade is. Whereas I feel like our staff purposely does things, like the teachers, to make sure that we don't feel like we're completely defeated if we like, have a bad grade, or if we get a bad grade on our test.

Some students shared how positive written words on returned class work makes a big impact on the confidence of students. Riley shared, “Even a little comment on a test or something that said, ‘Good Job!’ That builds my confidence. Or even little notes on papers, letting me know they actually took time and thought about my paper, that feels awesome.”

Some of the students addressed how having a more student-centered classroom actually builds student confidence. Michaela spoke about what she considers to be a confidence building classroom technique, “Actually talking to the students and engaging them, encouraging them to answer questions.” Sarah said, “I personally think if they would allow students to work more together, and help each other, it would help kids feel a little bit better about their grades and their confidence of trying to pass.” As principal of his school, Mr. Wilson touched on the power of affirmation and encouragement, “We reward small victories. We don't bash kids over failing or making, you know, making a bad grade We talk about what are we going to do to fix this. We do a lot of coaching.”

Diverse School Opportunities

In addition to the everyday words of affirmation and encouragement from the faculty of a school, it is important for a school to offer diverse opportunities for students to find and build confidence. Opportunities that students identified as building and developing confidence were both co-curricular and extra-curricular in nature. Kim shared:

> I think, on the other side of confidence level, our school does a really good job. We have lots of extracurricular activities. But like, normally, in a bigger school, you could do like, maybe three. Here, you can do as many as you want. And I feel like because we get to go and switch and do different roles and all those different activities, you get confidence in knowing that you can do something.

Carl said, “As far as extracurricular and things, there's something for every kid here regardless of your interest, but as far as athletics, I think we have almost every sport except for like, swimming, and we're getting wrestling.” Carrie shared the following about her school, “So also, like with sports, you don't have the tryouts. Like if you want to try something new, you get to be on a team.”

The principals at each school were quick to point out how the opportunities offered in their school can build confidence in students. Mr. Bliss stressed the importance of offering multiple opportunities in a small school:

> I think because we're a small school, there's opportunities. And even if they aren't that good, they still have the opportunity. Whereas at a larger school, there's cuts, athletics is a great example. Anytime you have those opportunities, that can build confidence. The ability to be in clubs, be in Student Council, be in FBLA, FFA. In a larger school, some kids might get lost, and they might not participate in anything. The majority of our kids participate in something. Some don't, we still have some that don't. But the opportunities are there. And they're more plentiful than they would be at a larger school.

Mr. Hinkle said, “We want 100% of our kids involved in some activity. That's one of our big things we are trying to do. We're trying to get them all involved, so hopefully the academic piece comes up.”

Ashley spoke of the impact participating in clubs have on confidence, “There are a lot of clubs that help with confidence. They try to just bring you out into the world, help you speak in front of others, they just give you a sense of belonging.” Mary agreed about the impact of clubs and added:

> At our age, we are still trying to figure out what our skills are, what we like to do, you know. I feel like there is something here for everyone: Theater, the LGBTQ club, Spanish club, Choir, Band, FFA, Student Council, just so you can figure out like, what you're good at and what you enjoy.

Chris said, "About the activities, sports, and clubs, they give you an opportunity to find who you are and to see what you enjoy. They give you an opportunity to see what you want to do in life."

Several students mentioned the impact Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses have on student confidence. Mary shared, "I feel like our school particularly has a lot of occupational classes. You have like, welding class and Leadership." Chris said, "We have a lot of career classes. Maybe if you want to go into a career, the classes we have here, can give you an experience of that career before you even get into it in the future." These comments on the impact CTE has on confidence were supported by the results of the PYD survey. CTE students (n=63) had a mean confidence score of 62.28 while non-CTE students (n=13) had a mean confidence score of 54.87.

Competence – Student Level

Competence is about what one can do. Youth may demonstrate competence in five ways: academically, cognitively, socially, emotionally, and vocationally (Lerner, 2007). Grades, social acceptance, and athletic competence also play a role in student competence (Geldhof et a., 2014). As was the case with confidence, students and adults alike said competence varies among students. Mr. Mahan shared the following when asked about the competence level of students:

> I think it depends. We have a very wide gap there. I feel like I have a huge portion of kids that don't think they're very competent in much. But then I do think there are quite a few kids here that have their specific thing that they're really into. And they think

> that is an excuse to not be good at those other things. 'No, I'm an athlete. So therefore, I can't be good in the classroom as well.' And I don't understand that.

The coding for competence level generated three sub-themes: school subject-centered, linked to school-based opportunities, and social competence. Competence was the lowest scoring construct on the PYD survey, with a mean score of 59.61.

School Subject-Centered

Students are aware of which school subjects they possess competence in and which ones they do not. Kasey shared:

> So, like, we can be in math class, and my friend who struggles with it always says, "I can't do this. I don't know how to do it." And so, she doesn't talk in there at all, because she's not competent in what she is doing, ever. And, that happens a lot in certain areas of our school. So, like, honestly, I hate to say it, but I feel like math is a big one, where there's a lot of non-competent students. I'm probably one most of the time. I do struggle with that.

Ashley spoke of the importance of knowing one's career path in building competence, "I feel like if they have a certain career path they want to go into, they do have a lot of competence just because of how many classes that we have that can get them ready for that." When describing sources of student competence in her school, Erika shared, "I think like, for me, it's probably academic. For like the whole school in general, it's probably CTE stuff."

Linked to School-based Opportunities

Many of the students and adults linked the level of student competence to a specific school-based opportunity. Robert said, "You can find something you are good at here." Bailey provided a more detailed thought, "I think everyone has their talents. Because there's some

people that play football or play volleyball, and that's their talent. And there are some people that are in band, and that's their talent. Some people are gifted in cooking." Kim personally shared:

> So, I can't talk for everybody, but I feel like the small successes I've had in the years of being here have made me feel more competent in more things. So, like, because I've done so much, like extracurricular activities, and different things in the classroom, I feel competent in trying new things because I know I've succeeded before. I don't really have that huge fear of failure, because I know that I've succeeded in some aspect of it.

Mrs. Starcher shared:

> Since there are lots of opportunities, I do feel like our students have at least one thing that they pull from and feel competent at. They're like, "Hey, this is my thing. And this is the thing that I do well." Now they could be failing all their other classes and just being competent in this one class, but I do feel like the majority of our students have at least one thing.

Arlee shared, "For the sophomores, I don't really see a lot of competence academically. But outside of school work, there's actually quite a lot of it. I know some of them are really, really competent towards sports." The PYD survey results supported what the students shared concerning the impact sports has on competence. Students involved with at least one sport (n=52) had a mean competence score of 61.39. Students who were not involved in sports (n=25) had a mean competence score of 55.87.

Some students spoke of the significant impact opportunities in their school, beyond academic achievement and course work, can have on their competence. Erika shared this about participating in Theater:

> I'm dyslexic. So, like, I don't like reading in general. But like, last year, I had like two lines, and I'm freaking out the whole time. But this year, I knew I could do that. So, once I did that, I was like, okay, I can take more. So now I'm in a pretty big part.

Shawna shared her own personal Theater story, “I was in Physics before I was in there, and I was just so stressed out with it. So, I dropped the class and took Theater. I like it so much better. I feel like it was a good thing for me.”

Social Competence

Some of the students addressed how they feel social competence is lacking among students today. Kim shared, “If you're not in the ‘in’ crowd, it seems like you're like not accepted at all. You don't like feel comfortable going and doing stuff in that social atmosphere because you've never been accepted there.” Jerry personally shared, “I've been like that since I was in preschool too. I've always been in the ‘out’ crowd. I always was the one that get picked on.” Mrs. Ray touched on the lack of social competence she sees in students, “I think with social competence, we've got a bit of a deficit there. We have so many students that do not engage socially in a positive way. Many students feel too awkward and that nobody wants to be around them.”

Competence – School Actions

When asked about what their school does to build and development competence, the students and school staff provided many different examples. It was apparent that the school principals and other staff are mindful of the need to build student competence. Mr. Hinkle shared, “And this goes back to our initiative, its self-efficacy. Are we doing it? We're doing some things. That's what we're trying to figure out right now.” The following five sub-themes

emerged: teacher actions, hands-on classes, college and career ready opportunities, student voice, and success and recognition.

Teacher Actions

Several students shared specific examples of a certain teacher who really instilled and cultivated competence in them. Arlee shared:

> Teachers help a lot with it. I know Mr. Dodson is very good at helping with that. He says some students are "studs" towards certain things. So, he definitely helps build our competence a lot towards saying things like, you're really good at this. And the teachers also do that. They'll say you're really good at this, you should aspire to do this.

Amy said:

> With certain teachers, you can actually have an adult conversation with them. Like Mr. Kelly, I had political conversations with that man, and not once did we argue about it, or did he say my views were not as good as his because I'm just a teenager.

Mr. Smith said, "I think again, just being positive toward what they can do and not beating them down for not meeting certain expectations and putting any extra pressure on them. Just, saying, 'If you just got one assignment finished, good job.'" Mrs. Lamb agreed, "Well, most of our teachers are encouraging, regardless of whether it's their program or someone else's. They take an interest in the kids. I think that makes a difference." Mrs. Nester spoke of the intentionality of building competence with students, "I think the relationship with a student is intentional and offers competence to make them feel more sure of themselves."

Hands-on Classes

In contrast to some of the classes the students mentioned when describing low levels of competence, CTE classes, Theater, Art, Band, and Choir all emerged as classes that build

competence through hands-on and engaging learning. Roger shared, “Those classes do something well. There's something different about the CTE teachers, that I like.” In regards to CTE classes building competence, Amy said, “I think with the CTE classes, that one's not too bad. It helps a lot because you got the boys and girls who like Welding, they're able to go and get their frustrations out. In Carpentry, they can build something.” Kristen spoke of why CTE classes are effective, “They work with you until you are good at it.” Sarah said, “I feel like it gives a student more experience and more on a higher level of knowing how to figure something out.” Mr. Wilson expressed how he wished his school provided even more opportunities for hands-on learning, “We do not have enough avenues for our kids to express their competence. We don't have enough, we need more hands-on type programs.”

Several students spoke positively about hands-on learning when discussing competence. Sarah said, “In Ag. Science, they give you the opportunity to have hands-on in the class, it just helps you. Some teachers allow you to do hands-on, like in Science and Art. There's some teachers that are like, don't touch nothing.” Erika referred to these hands-on and engaging classes as the “fun” classes, “I think I'm one of the very few people who doesn't have a fun class. I never leave the academic building. So, some people have Choir or Band, a lot of the boys are in like Welding or Carpentry.”

Kasey shared how a Career Technical Student Organization (CTSO) can build competence, “Several students have said FBLA helped them overcome things that they couldn't do before. And so, it made them more competent in what they were feeling in their actions and everything they do.” Mary felt the school’s focus on life skills was a way to build student competence, “At least a couple times a year we choose a class that builds life skills, like how to tie a tie or how to change a tire. But just life skills that you don't learn in a regular class.”

College and Career Ready Opportunities

For some students, being prepared for both a career and college was something they connected with being competent. John said, "They offer a lot of classes for a lot of different subjects. And when you reach like 11th or 12th grade, you can start taking college courses, to really hone those skills that you have." Betty shared, "Our mission statement is college and career ready. They get your prepared for if you want to go to college, or they prepare you for any career you want to go into." Mr. Bliss touched on the impact opportunities have on student competence:

> I think it goes back to opportunities again, 100 some odd kids, and they can take dual credit college classes, they can go to the tech college for half of the day and do a Welding program. We offer Power Plant Technology completely online, you can take it. Graduate with your CNA and your high school diploma, you can do that here. I think that in all areas, our pathways, our academics, some of the clubs, and FBLA state activities, we build competence.

Student Voice

Some students shared how important it is for schools to give students the opportunity to express their opinions and ideas and how this is linked to student competence. Mark shared:

> We have this thing called, Student Government. Like if a student wanted to start doing something, say for instance, like at lunch, they have the opportunity to go to their Student Government and their voices can be known to the teachers. It makes you feel like, you know, the adults are not just here doing their jobs, they really care about you.

Betty added, "You can even take the ideas that you have, I like this, this and this, and the teachers here will help you try to put it together. They want school, to be like, adapted to you."

The PYD survey supported the importance of providing students with leadership and student voice opportunities in school. Students involved in a school leadership role (*n*=22) had a mean competence score of 65.00 while students not involved in a school leadership role (*n*=55) had a mean competence score of 57.45.

Success and Recognition

Some of the students shared how success in school programs and recognizing success can build competence levels in a school. Carl said:

> I just think success in programs builds your competence. Just like as far as our football team, we built competence there with two back to back playoff appearances. Our basketball team, it's a state power every year. Like all our vocational programs we have here, they perform well.

Carrie shared, “Like each month, they choose a player who they think was doing well, and everything, and they announce it to everybody.”

Connection – Student Level

The PYD construct of connection is focused on mutual relationships students build with family members, friends, teachers, coaches, mentors, and community members (Lerner, 2007). The feelings of connection possessed by students came from multiple sources. There was also differences between schools. Some of the schools indicated an environment where cliques are present, while others shared they had friend groups, but no cliques. The following two sub-themes emerged: friend group and teachers.

Friend Group

The concept of having a friend group emerged in every school. In speaking of connection, Arlee said, “It really just depends on who you are friends with.” Carl shared,

“Obviously every school has different groups and cliques, but even across those groups, everybody's connected in some way.” Mark added, “Like, we don't really have cliques. We're all together. Growing up together, we care for each other.” This small school and community effect influenced the thoughts of several students. For some, it was a positive effect, and for others, a negative. Andrew said, “I feel like everybody knows everybody here.” Kasey shared:

> I would say it's in every school, but you always have your group, you have your net, you’re with your people. And really, especially in small schools, you don't really break outside that except when you’re with your teammates. I think we're pretty connected for the most part. But, there's people that you just don't really talk to, kind of the outcasts.

Tommy added, “Because you're in a small school, everybody knows what kind of groups you're with. So, they can judge you by that and decide whether or not they can talk to you, or if they want to hang out with you.” Carl spoke of a school culture where all types of students are still connected, “At schools you'll see, you'll see like, people classified as nerds and jocks. They all seem to be interlinked here.”

Within the friend group theme, it became obvious that different students in different schools have different perspectives and experiences. Bailey shared, “Everybody is just really accepting. And everyone talks to everyone. Like I said before, everyone’s friends with everyone.” Jerry on the other hand finds it difficult to connect to peers in his school:

> I’d just say for me in general, it’s really been a struggle trying to make connections with kids. That’s just because I’ve come from a different way of life from them or they’ve been raised, as in my terms, as city kids. I’ve been raised on a farm.

Mr. Bliss addressed the issue of outsiders not being accepted in his school:

> I think those that have been through our system, those that have been through the K-12 experience here, are very connected. Familial. I think where we run into some disconnect is with the kids that transfer in. There are some that are considered outsiders and maybe not given a chance, especially if they're a little bit different.

Based on the PYD results, it was obvious that some students in rural, low SES schools do not feel as connected as others. Male students (*n*=32) had mean connection score of 67.97, female students (*n*=43) had a mean connection score of 60.00, and non-binary students (*n*=1) had a mean connection score of 45.00. When it came to race, Black students (*n*=1) had mean connection score of 77.50, White students (*n*=56) had a mean connection score of 66.03, Multiracial or Biracial students (*n*=5) had a mean connection score of 56.50, Hispanic students (*n*=7) had a mean connection score of 51.79, Native American students (*n*=1) had a mean connection score of 47.50, and Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander students (*n*=1) had a mean connection score of 42.50.

Kim shared some interesting insight about student connection:

> I would say as we get older, though, it's a little bit harder for the people that haven't, like solidified their connections, to keep those. Because like, one of the vast differences between the beginning of high school, like freshman and sophomore year versus junior and senior, is that you're starting to get into your interests and your pursuits. If they're different than other people's, you may not continue to have those connections.

Arlee shared a similar thought, “Connection also has a lot to do with what you do with your time. So, the kids in sports have really strong connections with each other. If you’re not in sports, you don't have a connection with them.”

Teachers

For some of the students, connecting with teachers was easier for them than connecting with their peers. Arlee said, “Connection with the teachers is easy, because they're very open. Connection with the students, there's a whole other story.” Kasey shared, “I feel like we are pretty close. Like, especially with our teachers, like, we can definitely talk.” Once again, connection with teachers really depended upon the student and the school. Shawna said, “I feel like I would rather ask a peer for help than a teacher.” Mr. Bliss said, “I don't think that there's a single kid in our building that has sought out relationships with the adults in this building and has come up empty. To my knowledge.”

Connection – School Actions

Students and school staff shared various thoughts on how their school builds and develops a sense of connection among students. Mr. Lance felt that in his school, the greatest connection happens between students because they are all experiencing many of the same issues:

> I feel like the students are doing more of the connection, than we are. I mean, we give them strategies and things. But I think that because they can relate from where they came from, or where they've been, where they're coming from even, I think they build the connection more than we would ever even come close to.

The following five subthemes emerged: adult intentionality, student voice, student organizations, extracurricular activities, and trauma informed discipline.

Adult Intentionality

Various students provided specific examples of how adults in their school intentionally work to make students feel connected to each other and their school. Riley shared a simple classroom example of this intentionality, “I know some teachers don't let you pick who you work

with. They force you to talk to people that you normally don't talk to." Kasey shared an example from her leadership class:

> We have a student leadership class. And so, our teacher does kindness Friday, and usually we have to make a card. And she says you can't pick your friends. So, you have to write a kind message to this kid, you may not know anything about besides what they look like, but you make that kid's entire day. And that's just what I feel like is really important, at our school, we have done a lot.

Several students discussed how the opportunities made available at the school builds connection. Jerry said, "I feel like for the people that aren't really like, into sports and stuff, they try to come up with these different groups and stuff." John shared:

> There's lots of opportunities here. If students are not taking advantage of them, then I can only see it as it being their own fault. So, with all the opportunities we have, a student shouldn't complain if they don't feel connected.

Some students spoke of the intentionality of the school principal. Mary said:

> Things as simple as like at a pep rally, our principal will call us family. I mean, that's not a big deal, but I feel like that alone just kind of makes us feel more like, he, the head of the school, feels like we are family.

In regards to building the sense of connection in a school, Mark said, "It's about leadership, and we have good leadership here."

Student Voice

Adult intentionality led some students to discuss how simply sharing information with and listening to students, along with providing them opportunities to let their opinion be heard, actually builds connection within the school. Ashley shared:

> They talk to us, they let us know what's going on. They want to know what's going on with us. They focus on how we feel. They explain what's going on in the community and in the school, so we know what's going on.

Carrie said, “If you want to speak out on a certain topic, or you want to voice your opinion, they don't shut you down, they let you say what you have to say, and they listen.” Ashley further added, “They always do surveys before they change something or do something different. So, they see what the students like first, to make sure they're not going to step on any toes before they change something.”

Student Organizations

Several students spoke of the power and impact school-based clubs, student organizations, and co-curricular CTSOs can have on connecting students. Mary said:

> I know I always bring up clubs a lot, but I feel like clubs is a good one to point to with this one because you have places where you feel comfortable with people, the people that are in it, because you know that everyone here has the same beliefs. Just like this feeling of freedom to know that, you can say what you want and you don't have to worry about people having different viewpoints than you.

Jerry shared, “Like, a couple years ago, they started the FFA chapter here. It connects some of those agricultural students. And it's been growing slowly, but I feel like it's sort of trying to work.” John personally shared, “I'm in a club now called Skills. We go to these competitions and like when you're there, you can meet so many people. And you connect with them.” Mr. Bliss was quick to point to specific student organizations and school activities in his school that he believes builds student connection:

> For sure Honor Flight. For sure, our winter luncheon through our applied business class. Community cleanup in the fall and in the spring. ACT, we have an Athletic Christian Team. They do some things with the community during the holidays and stuff, and just for each other. And you know, in its name, Athletic Christian Team, I mean, I know he kind of walks that line. But even See You at the Pole.

The PYD survey supported what the students shared about how involvement in various CTSOs, student government, and other leadership opportunities, build connection in a school. Students serving in a school leadership role (*n*=22) had a mean connection score of 68.64 while students not serving in a school leadership role (*n*=55) had a mean connection score of 60.82. Students involved with a CTSO (*n*=30) had a mean connection score of 67.75 while students not involved with a CTSO (*n*=47) had a mean connection score of 60.05.

Extracurricular Activities

Since a school is full of students with diverse interests, a variety of school activities are needed to make as many students as possible feel connected. Riley felt that sports connect people, "Like sports, they really bring people together." For Roger, it was Spirit Week, "Spirit Week was the biggest thing at this school. Everyone would participate. Everyone would contribute money and it was just something that brought us all together." Amy shared how conducting a Special Olympics event at her school connected people, "Special Olympics brought a lot of us together. We would all hang out with our kids. It even brought the teachers together, the ones that did the games and stuff."

Trauma Informed Discipline

Mrs. Nester shared how she feels trauma informed training focused on properly confronting behavior issues has strengthened connection in her school:

> When we became trauma informed and decided that we're not going to, you know, engage a student when they're escalated, we're going to wait till they are able to reason and talk to them in a caring way. Yes, they'll still have a consequence for whatever they're doing wrong, but more of a learning process than a punitive process.

Character – Student Level

Based on the PYD construct of character, people with character usually display three attributes: a clear sense of right and wrong, a consistent sense of right and wrong, and a sense of right and wrong that treats everyone with equal consideration (Lerner, 2007). The character construct includes personal values, social conscience, values diversity, and conduct behavior (Geldhof et al., 2014). As was the case with the other PYD constructs in this study, character varied between students. Mary said the following about the character of students in her school, "Some is good and some is bad." Five sub-themes emerged from the coding for the student level of character: acceptance of others, respect for others, behavior, accountability, connected to home life.

Acceptance of Others

In the discussion about the character level of students in their school, many students wanted to talk about the lack of acceptance of certain people as an indication of poor character in some students. Kim said the following about students in her school, "Yeah, we have a really hard time accepting new people." Kim added, "I moved here, my sixth-grade year. So, I've been here for five years. But I wouldn't necessarily say that I've been completely accepted into this atmosphere. Because I'm just so different cultural norms wise." Arlee, a student who moved to her current school in the past year, shared, "I still have not made any friends basically." Roger spoke of the lack of acceptance for students of different races in a predominately White school,

“I've heard so many instances where students of color have been like, not physically harmed for being the color that they are, but like verbally, said to their face.” Riley shared this very profound thought:

> I think we have a hard time realizing that, you know, just putting ourselves in other shoes, like someone will say something rude to somebody, they don't realize that, you know, that person has feelings about that, and you know, how they're hurting others. They don't think about that.

Respect for Others

Several students shared how some students display character by giving respect to others. Some students discussed how students exhibit a lack of character when they show disrespect to others. Mary said, “I mean, I'd say that, for the most part, we all respect each other's beliefs pretty well. I think a lot of us keep our beliefs to ourselves just because, you know, obviously not everyone has the same beliefs as us.” When students spoke of disrespectful students, they connected lack of respect to several of the major themes in other parts of the study, such as parents and social media. Kasey said:

> They're doing what they want to do and not what the teacher wants to do. Because nowadays, you know, maybe back when, like our parents were going to school or something, if a kid did something wrong, the parent came in and they got mad at their kid, not the teacher, because they asked the teacher. Nowadays, parents come to the school and start screaming, yelling at the teachers. It's all their fault. Their kid did nothing wrong, because they take what their kids say over the teacher. I think it goes back to home life. And I think it goes back to social media.

Arlee shared how she feels her class of students lack respect, “They don’t respect stuff, our grade doesn’t. I don’t think.” Mr. Bliss recognized that character level varies between grade levels in his school, “Our junior class is of very strong character. And maybe some of our other classes aren't as strong.” As far as student character level by grade, the PYD survey indicated juniors (*n*=35) had a mean character score of 75.21 and sophomores (*n*=41) had a mean character score of 73.05.

Behavior

When discussing the character level of students in their school, students were quick to point to various negative behaviors as a sign some students lack character. Shawna said, “Like we don't really lie about what we do, but like, some of the stuff we do, it's not good.” Some students shared actual examples of bad student behavior. Erika shared, “I think the worst thing people do here is probably either cheat on something or skip class.” Shawna added, “Ever since I’ve been up here, it’s been vaping.” Riley said, “Kids are cussing on social media. I don't even cuss in front of my parents. I mean, because I'm nervous. Like, yeah, because I get in trouble.” Mr. Hinkle shared how he believes the school’s approach to handling behavior issues builds character in his school:

> From the administration side of it, we have kids, when they do get in trouble, which like I said before, you know, our referrals have been way down in the last three years for sure. So, if a couple of students come into my office who have had a disagreement and you know at least one of the kids is upset, don't try to handle the situation right then. Let them go think about it, and then come back. So, they reflect on that. Don’t engage when you’re fired up or they are.

Some of the students talked about students being pressured into bad behavior. Sarah said, “I see other students trying to pressure certain students into like, skipping.” Kyle gave a personal example, “Talking from experience, sometimes students get pressured into doing something they're not supposed to, like drugs.” Erika associated the temptation to participate in bad behavior with the lack of activities to get involved with in her community, “There's nothing to do on a Friday unless you want to go to a party, sit at home, or hang out in the Walmart parking lot.” According to the results of the PYD survey, students who are involved with activities in their community (*n*=26) had a mean character score of 76.25 while students not involved with activities in their community (*n*=50) had a mean character score of 72.35.

Accountability

In addition to some of the examples of poor character students brought up, they also mentioned kindness as an attribute of good character. Sarah said, “I see students like, helping out others, and helping them make the right choices.” John shared, “If a student is like struggling on their work. There's always some kids who will come around and help them understand in another way.” Mrs. Ray shared how she believes students hold each other accountable when it comes to character, “I think our students hold each other accountable. If there is that individual or that group of individuals that is not, you know, using good character, the others will call them out.”

Connected to Home Life

Both students and adults alluded to the connection of character and a student’s home life. Adults did discuss this subtheme more in depth than students. Gina shared the following about students in her school, “They've all been taught their manners at home and know how to say ‘no mam’ and ‘yes mam.’” Mrs. Flinn said, “I think depending on their home life, some of their morality is a little skewed. But overall, it is positive.” Mrs. Miller spoke of how she believes

character develops with maturity and how she feels most character-building skills are taught at school and not in the home:

> I think that's one of the main things that I noticed different here from the lower levels, that it is better here, but, I think a lot of that is maturity. Because a lot of these things our students are not taught at home. And the only character-building skills or respect that they learn are things they're taught here. And once you meet and talk with some of these parents, that's really, really obvious. So, I think that a lot of that comes with maturity and years of teachers modeling and trying to teach them.

Character – School Actions

When asked how their school works to build and develop character in students, three main sub-themes emerged from the student and school staff transcripts: adult modeling, school focus, and character-based clubs.

Adult Modeling

Several students talked about how the teachers and coaches in their school model good character. Riley said:

> So, we also have, like good men, like our football team. The coach will take those who don't have much character and put them with somebody who does have a lot of character, to see what they do and how they treat people and how they handle things, trying to help them get their character.

Carl shared how the adults show they value character in his school, “This is like, it's a respect thing. They give you just as much praise for being respectful and a good kid, as they do for being a genius.” Kim spoke of how students in her class have developed character by seeing it modeled by the adults in the school, “I know that I've seen lots of high standards for correct behaviors in

my junior class. They naturally want to be good leaders. And we've seen good leaders around us because we have a lot of really good leaders, teachers and stuff."

School Focus

Students pointed to various ways the school makes student character a priority. Mark shared how his school principal sets the tone for character:

> I think for most part, we have good character here because our principal, he's big on that. Like, you do not have to be the smartest and you do not have to be this and that, but you will have character, he's all about that.

Mrs. Love said the following about her school's focus on character, "I think we keep it up front. I mean, I talk about character, all the time in my classes. And I think most staff will do that." Kim said, "They've been trying to, like get better at a character development. They had this printed out document in every classroom with like different expectations for the school for character building." Mary shared how character can be developed through classroom assignments:

> We have a lot of assignments where we have to learn to respect each other's beliefs and what we believe is, you know, right or wrong. I think we get put into situations where we have to learn to respect others.

Kyle equated the service learning hours required at his school with building character, "They do these service learning hours. You have to get a certain number of hours doing work outside of school." Mrs. Nester shared how character and most of the other PYD constructs are something she believes is developed through her school's focus on service learning:

> Compassion, character, connection, and contribution, I think all get attributed to our service learning that we implemented about three years ago. The thing that I think helps

them with these things is we make them fill out a log. What did you do? What did you learn from it? And most of them will share how it felt really good helping somebody else. And they all learn different things.

Some of the adults discussed how focusing on character when dealing with student discipline is critical. Mr. Wilson shared the following about his approach to school discipline:

> We've got two rules at this school; my two rules are do not disrespect any of my teachers and do not bring tobacco products in my building. That's pretty easy. If you do those things, you are going to be punished. Discipline comes from within, you discipline yourself. I'm not disciplining you, I will punish you.

Character-Based Clubs

Students felt that certain clubs in their school succeeded at building and developing character in students. Ashley said, "Clubs try to help us build character and teach us right and wrong." Some students pointed to specific clubs that focus on character. Kim shared:

> I would say we also have an extra-curricular that builds character, it's called the Accountability Group. Students are selected based on how accountable they are and then the group attempts to build character school-wide. And so that group together, and also with the principal, tries to help people be more accountable for their actions.

Kasey shared information about another character-focused club in her school, "We have ACT, Athletic Christian Team, and you don't have to be like a Christian to be in it. But our sponsor really rides on character. We talk about that all the time in our meetings."

Compassion/Caring – Student Level

The construct of compassion, or caring, is about being able to show sympathy and empathy for others (Lerner, 2007). When asked about the level of compassion students possess at

their school, three sub-themes emerged from the student and school staff transcripts: varies with students, linked to positive behavior, and understanding and acceptance. On the PYD survey, students rated themselves the highest in Compassion/Caring, with a mean score of 76.67.

Varies with Students

As was the case with all of the PYD constructs, students felt like compassion varied between students. There was so much shared about this variance when talking about compassion, that it emerged as a stand-alone sub-theme. When asked about the compassion level of students in his school, Jerry said, “That all really depends on which person. There may be one or two in the class that cares.” Mary honestly shared:

> I feel like all high schoolers have a hard time thinking about anyone but themselves. At this stage, we're kind of self-absorbed. But I don't want to say that we're all like that, because I know people who are very compassionate. But then there's also some that aren't.

Some of the students were very specific about which students in their school have compassion and which students do not. Michaela shared, “In my class, there's not a lot, but there's definitely some with the older ones. Almost all of them have a lot of compassion, in the freshman class, not really.” Arlee added, “There really is not in the sophomore class either. You could tell someone about your problems, but they would just joke about it. The sophomore class is very close minded towards emotional things.” Michaela shared, “You can talk to the boys about stuff, but you definitely wouldn't do it when they're with their friends, because there's a higher chance of them making fun of you.” Kristen had a different perspective about compassion in her school, “I feel like everybody around here was raised the same way. Everybody just knows each other.

Most people are related. Even if you're not family, you just feel like you are because your parents know each other."

Some of the students connected compassion back to the student groups, or friend groups. Sarah shared, "Overall, you'll find groups here that actually care about other students that are in the group or outside their group." Jan said, "There are groups here. There is the group that plays sports, you have the one group that's, you know, very talented themselves. And then you have the other group that no one really likes, everyone talks about." The PYD survey results indicated that juniors (*n*=35) had a mean compassion score of 78.48 and the sophomores (*n*=41) had a compassion score of 74.96. Female students (*n*=43) had a mean compassion score of 77.13, male students (*n*=32) had a mean compassion score of 76.56, and non-binary students (*n*=1) had a mean compassion score of 96.67.

Linked to Positive Behavior

The adults connected lack of major behavior problems in the school to a high student compassion level. Mrs. Miller shared:

> We don't have a lot of behavior problems, I think because of that. This is a close-knit student population and most of them are really compassionate to their friends and look at the kids who have less and who can do less, and they're really good about encouraging them and helping them.

Mr. Hinkle said, "Some of that is, we don't have behavior issues, or let's say fights. Because I think that the kids feel comfortable coming to somebody and letting them know what's going on, or other kids defending another kid."

Understanding and Acceptance

Students shared how they believe compassion is exhibited through understanding and accepting others. Mark shared, “I mean, we're a small community, like, everybody knows everybody, I mean, I think we're pretty compassionate for each other.” Carl added:

> It goes back to the whole bullying thing. Like, everybody here has a sense of what's right and what's wrong, and if they see somebody that's been done wrong, they're going to help out and correct that. And then when they see somebody struggling, they’re going to feel for them and try to help them the best they can.

Shawna said, “Compassion is really good here, I’d say. We all understand and listen.” Erika added a salient point, “I think most students are going through the same thing.” Mr. Legg shared, “I feel like 90% of them are in the same boat. So, they're very compassionate to each other. I don't think we even have, I don't want to say we don't have, bullying. You may have some social media bullying.” Mr. Mahan said

> Like when I first got here, one of the biggest things about this school that blew my mind was that we have an LGBTQ club in [this part] of Kansas. I have also never seen high schoolers treat special needs kids the way these kids do. And so, I feel like our kids, when targeted the right way, are pretty good to each other.

These strong feelings of compassion shared by students were supported by the scores on some of the questions from the PYD survey. The score for the question, “When I see someone being picked on, I feel sorry for them” was the second highest on the entire PYD survey, with a mean of 4.13. The question, “When I see another person who is hurt or upset, I feel sorry for them” had a mean score of 4.05, the third highest score on the PYD survey.

The adults and students provided some examples of how some students in rural schools struggle to accept certain others. Mrs. Starcher shared, “I think they have good intentions. They can be sympathetic and empathetic of some things. But coming from a rural community, they are not always sympathetic or empathetic about mental health issues.” Mr. Bliss added:

> I think our kids are extremely caring, overall. But to Mrs. Starcher's point, for every kid that I think would give you the last dollar they have in their pocket or would do anything for you, we also have a kid that will say something really dumb, like, “Why do I need to learn Spanish, they need to learn how to speak English.”

Kim shared this about students at her school “So like, if you have some cultural differences from being from a different area, or just like a different background, sometimes they're not as compassionate.”

Compassion – School Actions

The students and school staff shared various examples of how their school works to build and develop compassion in students. Two sub-themes emerged from the coding: teacher modeling and school focus.

Teacher Modeling

Mrs. Nester said, “I feel the teachers model compassion with each other. We are a family.” Mr. Smith shared, “Personally, I feel even just me talking with other teachers in the hallway, that there's an abundance of compassion from that. And I do think the kids see that, it's just a trickle effect.” Students look to the adults in the school to model compassion and definitely notice what compassion looks like in others. John shared:

> Most of the teachers here feel a lot of compassion toward their students and like, build them up if they know something is going on in their personal life. They'll kind of make

> schoolwork less stressful if they know you are going through tough times, by giving you less to do.

Betty spoke of similar teacher compassion in her school:

> I feel like if they think that something's going on at home, something in your life, that they will try and help as much as they can, and they will understand if you need a little bit of extra time on an assignment or something, due to home life or issues going on.

Sarah said, “Sometimes, teachers will let you put your head down on the desk for a few minutes, to calm down. Most teachers will pull you out of class and talk to you. I feel overall, some teachers do show compassion.” Bailey said, “I guess you can say, teachers help with that, because if a teacher sees that anybody, is like picking or doing anything to anybody, they won't let that happen.”

School Focus

Some of the students discussed how they have witnessed their school make compassion a priority and a focus. Kim shared:

> A while back, we watched these videos, like every week, for like, character education. We talked about different social emotional things, and like how to address it, and how to help people, which I think opened the door for it. And that was instilled in the classroom every week.

Mary said:

> We do a lot of assignments or projects where we have to learn to work with others in a way that shows compassion. We have to respect each other's views on different subjects. And I feel like they teach that really well here.

The adults strongly believed a focus, or culture of compassion must be established in a school for students to become more compassionate. Mr. Bliss said, “I think compassion is built into everything we do, or try to do, if we're truly putting students first.” Mr. Wilson said, “We've had kids come in here and treat others poorly. And I'm like, we don't do that here. We just don't do that here. We don't act that way. Especially with those ninth graders sometimes.”

Contribution – Student Level

Contribution is “the desire and the capacity to give back to those people and institutions that give to us” (Lerner, 2007, p. 183). Once again, students and adults indicated that the contribution level in their school varies with students. Arlee said, “I think this one varies by student.” Students and school staff mainly connected the level of student contribution to the sub-theme of volunteerism.

Volunteerism

When asked about the level of student contribution, many pointed to the willingness of students to volunteer around the school and community. Mark shared:

> Yeah, I think it's good. Like we got flooded just a little bit ago, and we had a bunch of guys down there cleaning out the locker room. Just volunteering their hours to come in and get something done. You know, that's big time.

Erika said, “If we have like a volunteer thing at the school, if students can find a way to get there, they'll be there.” Sarah shared, “I see a lot of students that volunteer, like Student Council. They have a lot of students in there that volunteer and help.” Mr. Stone said the following about students at his school, “When our coach takes kids to the food bank, he never has a problem getting kids to go with him. He can take a busload every day.” Mr. Bliss shared, “The kids are giving of their time to work concessions and they volunteer to do different things.”

The results of the PYD survey indicated that students involved in school leadership and in community activities have higher contribution scores. Students involved in community activities (*n*=26) had a mean contribution score of 74.87 while students not involved in community activities (*n*=50) had a mean contribution score of 67.07. Students involved in a school leadership role (*n*=22) had a mean contribution score of 75.61 while students not involved in a school leadership role (*n*=55) had a mean contribution score of 67.70.

Contribution – School Actions

Students and school staff shared several ways they believe their school builds and develops contribution in students, but they also mentioned contribution is something they see modeled in their community and school. Two sub-themes emerged from the coding of transcripts: community service/service learning projects and school and community modeling.

Community Service/Service Learning

When students were asked how their school develops the sense of contribution in students, community service and service learning were mentioned most frequently. Some students talked about the service learning hours the school requires. Chris shared, "We have community service hours that we do, you know, to give the students a chance to give back to the to the community." Several students discussed how certain clubs or student organizations in their school are focused on community outreach. Mary said, "In leadership, which is a part of the Student Council, we plan, like, different projects that try to like reach out to the community." Kim shared:

> Community cleanup is something we have two times a year. It's run by the FBLA. The entire student body of the high school helps cleanup the property of different people in

the community. So, the school sets aside a full day for the teachers to come and help and the students to go and help.

A few students shared how giving back to the community occurs as an outgrowth of one of their classes or after school programs. Amy said, “In JROTC, we got to go to a homeless shelter to feed them.” Bailey shared, “Our agriculture teacher here, he goes to the lake and he'll have other students go to pick up and cleanup over there.” Riley said, “Our 21st Century after school and summer group do some community service. I think they painted a park one year and cleaned it up. And they repainted stuff at our school.” Jerry shared a profound thought on connecting with the community through community service, “It also helps you learn about the people in the community more. When you go to someone’s house and help clean-up, you learn about them too.”

School and Community Modeling

The school staff shared how adults in the school model contribution through their actions. Mr. Bliss said:

> And these kids give their time because they see adults like Mrs. Love. Now, there's some adults in this building that when 3:25 happens, they're gone. But there's a lot of adults in this building that go to student games, they're visible, and they're giving of their time.

Several students shared how contribution is something they have witnessed being modeled in their local community. Kasey shared, “I think pretty big. Like, our community is awesome. It's very, very loving, and they're always there to help.” Kim said:

> Well, in our community, we have a huge support group. Like we have lots of people that support the school because the school is like one of the biggest things in our town. And

so, lots of people are giving to us. I feel like the main contribution that we have from students back to everyone else, is because we're trying to repay some of that back.

Carl shared the following about contribution, “I feel like this is a community thing. It goes back to law offices, doctors giving back, giving money to make all the football fields and softball fields possible.” Mr. Stone shared how he wishes students had more opportunities to contribute in a rural area, “The problem for us is more creating the opportunity, than it is the kids participating. Our kids will do whatever we ask them to do. The opportunities to give back are not as great as they would be in a larger area.”

There is more work to be done in rural communities when it comes to making students feel connected and valued in ways that inspire them to make significant contributions. The PYD survey results indicated that students do not necessarily feel important in their community. The two lowest scoring questions on the PYD survey were about community. The score for the question, “I feel like an important member of my local community” was 2.44 while the score for the question, “Adults in my town or city listen to what I have to say” was also 2.44.

Research Question Three

The third research question sought to discover the specific services, opportunities, and supports rural, low SES schools are implementing to strengthen the mental health and confidence, competence, connection, character, compassion, and contribution of students. The four schools in the study had similar services, opportunities, and supports, but they also each had unique ones. There were also differences between the two states. The two Kansas schools were more advanced in implementing initiatives to address mental health and PYD. Most of the two Kansas school initiatives were in their third or fourth year of implementation whereas the

initiatives in the two West Virginia schools were implemented either last school year or the current school year.

The principals of each school touched on how the most important piece to any service, opportunity, or support, is the people involved. Mr. Bliss shared, “We have a lot of things that we've thrown at mental health. But it really is people. And we do have the right people. But it's a long journey.” Mr. Hinkle said, “It’s not the system or program, it’s the people.” Mr. Wilson said:

> I think we have an advantage in that we have a lot of folks who come in here who are good people, I think we have an abundance. In this area, we have a lot of people of faith. They have a moral compass about how to deal with and treat people.

The principals and adults at each school shared how they are willing to try anything if it helps students and how that means frequently looking for help outside of the school. In speaking of the lack of resources in small rural schools, Mr. Bliss shared, “It is difficult to manage everything. Sometimes it is just a matter of bodies.” Mrs. Marty, district student services coordinator, said, “If a kid needs something, then we have a lot of places that we can go.” Mrs. Ray shared the following about all her school does to support student well-being, “We're willing to try new things. One of my students even said, ‘We're just like this experimental school.’ Like, that's a good thing, because some things will stick.” Mr. Bliss spoke of this willingness to experiment, “I think we're flexible and that we're a caring enough staff to try new things. And we're willing to experiment a little bit if we need to try to do what's best for kids.”

Student and adult focus group interview transcripts, school observations, and school documentation were analyzed to answer this research question. There were some similarities between each of the four schools, however, each school also had some unique approaches to

their mental health and PYD interventions. Therefore, the major services, opportunities, and supports that emerged are organized under each school. A service is an action done to or for youth intended to improve their health, safety, and overall well-being (Pittman et al., 2003). Opportunities are actions by youth where they are actively engaged in interacting with others in real world scenarios and solving problems (Pittman et al., 2003). Supports are activities done with youth to facilitate access to interpersonal relationships and resources (Pittman et al., 2003).

Kansas School One - Services

The major services being implemented in Kansas School One to address student mental health and PYD include: food distribution, after school and summer programming, social-emotional learning interventions, a public/private partnership for mental health therapy and counseling, and a district-wide social worker.

Food Distribution

In addition to providing free and reduced breakfast and lunch to students, the school also provides additional food to students in the form of snacks during the after-school program, weekend back-pack food programs for those who need it, and summer feeding programs. The school works with the local food bank to provide the food that is sent home for the weekend. Parents signup for the back-pack meal program. The school also implemented a second chance breakfast program, which involves delivering breakfast to the classroom after the first block of classes, because students were not eating school breakfast at the beginning of the day.

After School/Summer School Programming

The school received a 21st Century Community Learning Center (CCLC) federal grant to implement an afterschool and summer school program. The CCLC program provides academic enrichment activities and educational development services to families of children who are

served by the program. The program also provides additional enrichment experiences for students such as, physical activity, nutrition education, art and music programs, counseling, and service learning opportunities (Afterschool Alliance, 2021). Through this program, the school also offers night classes for parents.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Interventions

The school utilizes the Rethink framework to deliver it's social-emotional learning interventions. Rethink involves professional learning, multi-tiered curriculum, assessment, and both behavior support and progress monitoring tools (Rethink Ed, n.d.). In addition to offering SEL lessons to all students during an advisory period, the school offers a SEL class to higher tiered students who need this service the most. Samantha described her SEL class the following way, "It is a class designed for me. It's just a class that I take. I'm given stuff. My teacher is the counselor that gives me the assignments. I went through a book with a lot of information and tools." The SEL class uses Rethink SEL curriculum with modules on stress management, self-control, focus, and problem solving (Rethink Ed, n.d.).

Public/Private Partnership for Mental Health Therapy and Counseling

The school realized because of its small size and lack of resources, they could not provide intense mental health therapy for students who needed it. To meet this need, the school developed a partnership with a community mental health center. Parents sign their children up to see a mental health therapist who comes to the school every other week to meet with the students.

District-wide Social Worker

In realizing the growing needs of students of all ages, the district hired a social worker to work with each school in the district. The social worker assists teachers and counselors in the

school and specifically works with students who have the greatest social emotional needs. The social worker has a current case load of 19 students in this school. Speaking from the teacher perspective about the effectiveness of the mental health work the social worker and school counselor is doing in her school, Mrs. Love shared:

> It's actually improved over the years that I've been here. And a lot of that is due to our counselor, and to Mrs. Starcher, the social worker. They are willing to work so hard with these kids, to help them come up with coping skills and to learn how to navigate through these waters. And they're doing an amazing job, throughout that process.

Kansas School One – Opportunities

Many of the opportunities being offered for students in Kansas School One were brought up and described throughout the focus group interviews with both students and adults as they talked about what they believe strengthens mental health and PYD. The major opportunities that emerged from focus group interviews, observations, and document analysis included: student leadership opportunities through student clubs and organizations; co-curricular and extracurricular activities; and college, career, and workplace readiness opportunities.

Student Leadership Opportunities

The school offers the following clubs and organizations: Student Council, Accountability Group, Athletic Christian Team (ACT), FFA, FBLA, National Honor Society, SAFE (Seat Belts are for Everyone), and Scholar's Bowl. The school participates in Honor Flight, which is a program where students are paired with veterans as they visit a host of memorial and landmarks in and around Washington D.C. To increase student voice, the school is working on transitioning parent/teacher conferences to be student led conferences.

Co-curricular and Extracurricular Activities

The school offers the following sports: Baseball, Boys' and Girls' Basketball, Cross Country, Football, Golf, Softball, Track & Field, and Volleyball. The school has a Choir and Band.

College, Career, and Workplace Readiness

The school offers On the Job Training opportunities for Seniors and has been working to increase internship opportunities for students. The school has worked to add CTE pathways at the school. They currently offer Agriculture, Business, and Family and Consumer Sciences. The school plans to add a Gaming program and to convert the old school kitchen into a culinary lab space with the possibility of running a school-based café. Students are able to attend the local Community and Technical College for half of the day to take additional CTE programs not offered at the school, like welding. Dual credit college classes are made available to students and they also offer an online program in Power Plant Technology.

Kansas School One – Supports

The major supports provided and available in Kansas School One to address student mental health and PYD include: Multi-Tier System of Supports, Kansas Communities That Care survey data, Responsibility Centered Discipline, Trauma-Informed Care, school counselors, and teachers.

Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS)

The school uses the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) to evaluate and address the social-emotional needs of students. MTSS provides a method of early identification and intervention for students who are struggling emotionally. The Rethink SEL curriculum is used in advisory period with all students, which represents Tier 1. Higher Tier students are identified and

take an SEL class specifically designed for their needs. The adults in the school acknowledge they do not actually have a formal referral process within MTSS. Mrs. Starcher, the district social worker, shared:

> I have a lot of teachers and staff that will bring up that we don't have a formal referral process. But with it being such a small school, it is pretty easy for them to just express their concerns about students. Then I, depending on what it looks like, I'll meet with them once or I can make it a regular thing. So, it is slightly informal, the referral process, but I do feel like most staff is very open to talking to me about that.

Kansas Communities That Care Survey Data

The Kansas Communities That Care (KCTC) youth survey has been administered annually for free in Kansas since 1994. The survey tracks teen use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs as well as providing a baseline for teen prosocial and antisocial behavior at the peer, school, family, and community levels (Greenbush & The Southeast Kansas Education Service Center, n.d.). The school uses the data from the survey to make decisions concerning programming for the students. One example of specific programming the school has implemented to address certain antisocial behaviors is a program focused on sexual and domestic violence administered by the Kansas Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence.

Responsibility-Centered Discipline (RCD)

Responsibility-Centered Discipline (RCD) is an approach to school discipline that compliments the efforts of the Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS) and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). A key to success for PBIS and MTSS programs is involving all students in the first level of intervention and RCD is designed to provide consistent support at that level (RCD, n.d.). In an RCD school, the adults work together to identify the values and

skills (character, compassion, academic competences, etc.) they want students to leave school possessing. Once these values and skills are identified, they are used to develop a common language to address challenging moments with students (RCD, n.d.). In discussing student discipline in his school, Mr. Bliss said, “Students are more fragile now. We cannot punish them like we used to. We give kids second and third chances and maybe fifth and sixth chances.”

Trauma-Informed Care (TIC)

Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) is about recognizing and responding to signs and symptoms of trauma to better support students who have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Examples of ACEs include: experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect; witnessing violence in the home or community; having a family member attempt or die by suicide; substance use problems in the home; mental health problems in the home; and instability in the home (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2019). Mr. Bliss shared the following about TIC in his school:

> We've made an effort as a district with the ACEs training, to be trauma informed. I am not going to lie to you and say that we're trauma informed. I will say that right now, we're probably trauma aware. I just don't think we're there yet.

School Counselors

With so many schools adding additional services and supports in the form of additional staffing, including mental health therapist and social workers, one may overlook the importance of the role of school counselor in strengthening student mental health and PYD. School counselors still serve a very critical role at the school and in this school, the students recognized their importance. Kasey shared:

> I think our counselor is pretty awesome. I think there's not one person in the school that does not like her, they love her. And like you can go in there anytime and talk to her. And sometimes she'll set up meetings just to see if you're doing okay. And you can go in there and talk to her until you come back out feeling better about things. So, I'd say she's definitely a huge support system in our school.

Teachers

The importance of a teacher in supporting students cannot be understated. Students need support and they know when teachers support them, and when they do not. Students are quick to point out who the most supportive and understanding teachers are in their school and how they exhibit understanding and care. Riley shared a specific example of how one of her teachers exhibits understanding and concern for mental health:

> One of my teachers is now having mental health days in her class, where you can't do homework, you can't do any assignments. You can read, you can color, you can play video games, it's pretty much like a free day. Just to take a break from schoolwork because of the stress of it.

Samantha said:

> Our staff is probably the best staff out there. Because they will drop anything to talk to a student about anything. I mean, teachers have pushed back deadlines for me because I can't focus in class, because my mental health is going crazy. And if you walk around the school, and don't see that a teacher cares about mental health, then I don't think you're looking at our school right. Because it just kind of radiates from them.

There was one teacher in this school students kept talking about. Riley had this to say about her, “I feel like my Business teacher reaches out to make sure students are doing alright. I

don't know how many times I've had a different look on my face and she was able to ask me if I was doing okay." Samantha also shared some thoughts about the Business teacher, "But she stops the class and gives us time for self-care. And just that class, you know, it's Business Management, yet we end up doing things to help us." Arlee shared about how much Mrs. Love impacts her day:

> There are days I get out the car and me and my mom are in a fight. And I walk in and I see Mrs. Love, and it's so sweet. Because she asks me, "Are you okay?" It is so sweet. Because like I said, coming from big school, you don't see that. You can't really talk to teachers.

This support and care for students was reinforced during the adult focus group interview when Mrs. Love shared the following about how important it is for students to receive extra social-emotional support, "And on the teacher side, I would rather see them be taken out of my class to get those skills, so they're more successful in my class on a day to day basis."

Kansas School Two - Services

The major services being implemented in Kansas School Two to address student mental health and PYD include: food distribution, health clinic, Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG), social-emotional learning class, a public/private partnership for mental health therapy and counseling, and Talent Search.

Food Distribution

In addition to providing free breakfast and lunch to every student, food is also made available to students through teachers maintaining snacks, especially advisory teachers. Snacks are also available for students at the health clinic.

Health Clinic

Through a grant, the school district built an addition to the school to house a health clinic. The school district leases out the building to a community health center who runs the clinic. In addition to basic student health needs, the clinic also provides school and sports physicals and addiction treatment. Parents are able to make appointments for their children at the clinic, thus, cutting down on students leaving school for appointments. A dentist is at the clinic once a week and mental health sessions are conducted at the clinic also. Extra clothes and food are available to students at the health clinic.

Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG)

Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG) is a state-based national non-profit organization for youth who face significant challenges. It is designed to help youth reach economic and academic success through three components: project-based learning, trauma informed care, and employer engagement (JAG, n.d.). Mr. Hinkle, the school principal, had the following to say about the program:

> We've had Communities in Schools and it just never really worked out for us. And so, JAG, I think it helps. I don't think there's probably another 10% of our kids that would make it through without some of that stuff. Probably a higher number having post-secondary success because of JAG. It is just mentorship on steroids.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Class

The school uses the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) to evaluate and address the social-emotional needs of students. MTSS provides a method of early identification and intervention for students who are struggling emotionally. The Tier 2 students in the school meet with a Social Studies teacher, who has 15 years of experience in juvenile corrections and has a

degree in criminal justice. The teacher uses Thinking for a Change curriculum to deliver this specialized SEL class. This curriculum has three major parts: social skills, cognitive behavior, and problem solving.

Public/Private Partnership for Mental Health Therapy and Counseling

The school has developed a partnership with a multi-county mental health facility to provide mental health therapy and counseling for students. Sessions can be conducted virtually or in-person at the school-based health clinic. Based on focus group interviews and documentation analysis, it is obvious the school is working diligently to promote this service to parents and teachers. John shared how he encouraged to seek therapy:

> I've noticed these last few years, they've really been trying to start a therapy program. They finally launched it this year, actually. I was approached by my counselor to start therapy, and I have started since then. She actually wanted me to talk to other students, who she feels also suffer from anxiety and depression, to get them into counseling and stuff like that, to help them.

The school district also created promotional flyers to distribute in schools and to parents with information on their mental health intervention program. There is a QR code on the flyer for a parent or teacher to scan to make a student referral. The district has a mental health liaison who coordinates the student services. The flyer indicates that the program is designed to: improve school attendance, decrease dropout rates, improve behavior, increase graduation rates, improve grades, and increase stability in the home.

The Talent Search

The Talent Search program is a Federal TRIO Program aimed at identifying and assisting individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds who have potential to succeed in higher education.

The program provides academic, career, and financial counseling to students and encourages them to continue and complete postsecondary education after high school (United States Department of Education, 2021). Mrs. Nester, one of the school counselors, had the following to say about this program, “It's a Gear-Up program. It targets low income, academically deficient students. They take them on college visits, they have study skill camps for them. They come in on our club day and meet with the kids.”

Kansas School Two – Opportunities

Many of the opportunities being offered for students in Kansas School Two were brought up and described throughout the focus group interviews with both students and adults as they talked about what they believe strengthens mental health and PYD. The principal and the staff stressed how important it is for them to get every student involved in something. Mrs. Nester, school counselor, said, “I can say that if they're not involved, they chose not to be involved.” Mr. Hinkle, school principal, shared:

> Sometimes we have to drag them kicking and screaming to get them involved in something. But if we have a kid not involved in anything, we’ll check to see what that kid is interested in and try get them something, Band, Theater, let's get them involved in something.

The major opportunities that emerged from focus group interviews, observations, and document analysis included: student leadership opportunities through student clubs and organizations; co-curricular and extracurricular activities; and college, career, and workplace readiness activities.

Student Leadership Opportunities

The school offers the following clubs and organizations: Art Club, Career Associations, DECA, FBLA, FCA, FCCLA, FFA, French, Interact, Key Club, LGBT&F, Native American, National Honor Society, Prom Committee, Rachel's Challenge, SkillsUSA, Spanish Club, Student Council, Talent Search, Thespians, Upward Bound, and Post-Secondary. John shared the following about the importance of student leadership opportunities, "Clubs allow you to have social interactions and get to meet people that you don't really know. There are also leadership opportunities, like getting elected President or Treasurer." Mary said, "I think FFA is a big thing, because it gets you out into the community. It helps with leadership, speaking, and people skills. You get to go to competitions and broaden your knowledge of these different things."

Extracurricular and Co-Curricular Activities

The school offers the following sports: Baseball, Boys' and Girls' Basketball, Cross Country, Football, Golf, Soccer, Softball, Swimming, Tennis, Track and Field, Volleyball, and Wrestling. Carrie shared the following about the importance of sports in her school, "With sports, when you don't have to try out, that is giving students more of an opportunity to learn to love this sport, they grow in it." The school has Art, Band, Theater, Debate Team, Forensics Team, and Music.

College, Career and Workplace Readiness

The school offers the following CTE programs at the school: Agriculture, Business and Marketing, Family and Consumer Sciences, Health Sciences, and Project-Based Learning. Students are able to attend the local community college, which is located adjacent to the school, and take additional CTE programs not offered at the school, like welding, and also college courses. According to Mr. Hinkle, the school principal, the school encourages all students to take

college classes so they can get a taste of what it is like and hopefully not be intimidated in the future to take more college courses. The school offers On the Job Training opportunities for students along with apprenticeships to provide students with additional real-world work experiences. Mary shared the following about the college, career and workplace readiness opportunities offered at her school:

> I think one thing that I really like that the school offers is, if you know what you want to go into and you take all those classes that go along with going into that career, you have the option to go even further and take college classes that will like prepare you for your future. And that way, you're not stuck taking those high school classes that won't necessarily benefit you in the future

The school uses their advisory time with students to address life skills and career planning. Chris shared how he feels advisory time is an important opportunity for students at his school:

> I will say advisory class, or life skills is an important opportunity. Usually at the beginning of the year, we go on the website called Xello, it is about careers and stuff. And you take a bunch of tests to see what you like and what you're interested in, and then you are given an opportunity to pursue them through the career classes we offer here.

John said the following about his school, “The school here really wants you to succeed. It's really nice of them to offer, like certain college, like college searching things.”

Kansas School Two – Supports

The major supports provided in Kansas School Two to address student mental health and PYD include: Multi-Tier System of Supports, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports Panorama Education assessment data, Storm Shelter, School Counselors, and Teachers.

Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS)

The school uses the MTSS to evaluate and address the social-emotional needs of students. MTSS provides a method of early identification and intervention for students who are struggling emotionally. Social-emotional learning, centered around the Kansas Social, Emotional, and Character Development Standards, is delivered during advisory time for all students which represents Tier 1. It is during this time and with their advisory teacher when students are screened for placement in the MTSS using the Student Risk Screening Scale (SRSS). In addition to the SEL curriculum and screening, Tier 1 also involves providing career guidance lessons, communicating school-wide expectations, and providing brain breaks.

Students designated at-risk are provided Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions with regular progress monitoring. Tier 2 students attend a social skills class utilizing the Thinking for a Change curriculum. A mental health referral plan is developed for these students with student of concern meetings held and regular check-ins. Tier 3 students have a specialized curriculum, developed by the district student services coordinator, that they meet and discuss regularly. A behavior plan is developed and wraparound meetings are conducted. The school has implemented a robust student referral system referred to as Student of Concern. The purpose is connection and awareness. Reasons for referral include: non-academic classroom issues, family issues, past or current traumas, bullying, and certain red flags. Staff at the school are encouraged to check-in with Tier 2 students with the following expectations: make eye contact, greet them, short inquiry of how they're doing, no prying of issues, make administration and/or counselors aware if they are upset or need supports, and celebrate successes. Mrs. Nester, school counselor, had the following to say about the Student of Concern meetings:

> I think definitely, you know, our Student of Concern meetings are a way that we can all work together to help those kids that we've identified as needy, or just making teachers aware of the trauma or the situations that those kids are going through so that we can be supportive.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

The school implements a PBIS approach to discipline with a focus on prevention and not punishment. The goal of PBIS is to make schools more effective in providing equitable and safe learning environments for all students and to reduce exclusionary discipline such as, office discipline referrals, suspensions, and restrain and seclusion (Center on PBIS, 2021). Families, students, and school staff set goals and work together to achieve improved student outcomes, including academic performance, social-emotional competence, reduced bullying behaviors, and decreased rates of student-reported drug/alcohol abuse (Center on PBIS, 2021). Mr. Hinkle, principal, shared there were only 344 discipline referrals for the entire school year, with 266 of those being attendance. He indicated that the school only had 13 behavioral referrals the entire year.

Panorama Education Assessment Data

The district student services coordinator uses the Panorama Education Social Emotional Learning assessment results to identify SEL needs in the school. Panorama Education provide their research-backed survey instruments open-source and free for educators to use. The SEL assessment tools help schools measure and support each student's soft skills, like growth mindset, self-efficacy, social awareness, and self-management (Panorama Education, n.d.). An example of how the school is already using the data generated from this assessment is their initiative to strengthen the self-efficacy among students. The assessment results indicated that

only 34% of the students attending the school possess self-efficacy. The school plans to make self-efficacy a priority through intentional instruction and to target Tier 2 students with small group instruction to build self-efficacy.

Mrs. Marty, the district student services coordinator, said the following about acting on the assessment results, “We have had a lot of conversations about self-efficacy and how to build that. And everything I've been reading is things that teachers already do. And so just, you know, providing that intent, being intentional.” From the student perspective, Ashley believes these assessments for student mental health are important:

> I do think they're trying to help because they're always telling us if you need anything, talk to one of the teachers, administrators. They also always send out surveys to ask like how everyone's doing and it's always anonymous, so people aren't pressured or aren't scared that someone's going to know what they're going through.

Storm Shelter

One of the specific goals the school had as part of their trauma informed care approach to student discipline was to provide a quiet and peaceful room for students to calm down in if they were upset or frustrated. This room is called the Storm Shelter at the school and it is a very inviting and relaxing room, with comfortable furniture, light blue paint, diming lights, and cool wall lights. During the focus group interviews, the students had much to say about the Storm Shelter. Mary said, “We have this Storm Shelter they set up. So, if you're ever feeling overly stressed, they’re trying to give you ways to get that out without letting it go too far and getting into arguments.”

Sarah spoke from her own personal experience of using the Storm Shelter:

> The Storm Shelter is this room that's in the office for kids to go down there and calm down and kind of get their stuff together, a place they can feel safe. Where they can actually sit there and be okay. I was at one point, one of them. I feel, from my perspective, that some kids are mainly in the Storm Shelter, or have not been here at school at all, because of the bullying, being kind of pushed around, and then their homelife.

School Counselors

In addition to the additional people at the school and in the district focused on student mental health and overall well-being, the school counselors are still recognized as having an integral role in supporting students. Mary shared the following about her school counselors, "I know there's three different counselors and each one I think tries to get as involved in the school as possible so that when you do need to talk, you're comfortable enough to do so." Sarah said, "I will tell you this, Mrs. Nester, our counselor here, she really cares. She's the one that got me into therapy. She's someone that actually cares about how the students are. She's helped a lot of kids get therapy." Mrs. Marty, had this to say about the school counselors, "I would say, district wide, we have really good counselors. And I think they are good in every building in terms of building this relationship with kids and advocating for them."

Teachers

When it comes to feeling supported and identifying a critical interpersonal relationship they have in the school, many students shared how important a caring teacher is. Mary said, "I do definitely think that the teachers here try to gain personal relationships with all the kids so that if the kids ever feel like they need someone to talk to, they're comfortable enough to go to a teacher." Ashley said the following about teachers at her school, "Yes, I think they go out of

their way to support us." Mary added, "I've personally seen teachers notice kids are not acting the way they usually do and pull them aside and have a conversation with them. And try to get them out of the funk and see what's wrong with them." John shared, "They definitely target some students who they think are really affected by mental health. They try to make them better by suggesting certain things for them to do." Mr. Mahan, the wrestling coach at the school, had the following to say about teachers at the school, "I think that's because they care a lot. I think sometimes they get really frustrated because they genuinely care. They're not here, clocking in and out, they care about students."

West Virginia School One - Services

The major services being implemented in West Virginia School One to address student mental health and PYD include: food distribution, Communities in Schools (CIS), a public/private partnership for mental health counseling, and Department of Rehabilitation Services.

Food Distribution

In addition to providing free breakfast and lunch to every student through the Community Eligibility Program (CEP) through the USDA, the school also provides additional food to students in the form of snacks from teachers during school and weekend back-pack food programs for those who need it. Carl said, "There are several teachers here that keep food, like snacks and stuff in their desk, for kids that need it or are hungry." Bailey shared, "They give food to people who want it, so they have like almost every Thursday, they have a big cart full of bags of food and they give them out." School cooks assemble the food bags and during typical school years, students take the bags home on weekends. During the current year, because of COVID-19, bus drivers have been delivering food to homes.

Communities in Schools

Communities in Schools (CIS) is a national program working in 2,900 schools across 26 states and the District of Columbia. For over 40 years, CIS has been focused on providing integrated student supports to improve student outcomes by removing academic and non-academic barriers to learning (Communities in Schools, n.d.). In West Virginia, the First Lady has made CIS her primary initiative. The West Virginia legislature allocated $3 million to expand the CIS program from three to 11 counties for the 2019-20 school year.

In partnership with superintendents, principals, and other key school staff, CIS places a site coordinator in each participating school to deliver the model of integrated student supports. CIS provides activities and interventions for students in the following categories: academic assistance, behavioral intervention/modification, case management, college and career preparation, community service/service learning, enrichment/motivation, family engagement, life/social skills, physical health, and professional mental health (Communities in Schools, n.d.).

In this specific school, the CIS coordinator has been working diligently to work with students who are habitually absent from school. Once in-person classes did resume at the school during the second semester, after some COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, many of the students (almost 50%) did not start attending in-person classes on a regular basis. The CIS coordinator spends a lot of her time calling and visiting the homes of students. Mr. Wilson, school principal, said, “The home is the biggest predictor of schools.” When asked why students in the focus group interviews did not mention CIS, Mr. Wilson said, “There's two reasons for that. One is it's new. The other is the kids that it most dramatically impacts, are kids who do not come to school, you probably didn't talk to any of them.”

Public/Private Partnership for Mental Health Counseling

Even though the school has a full-time school counselor, who has a Master's Degree in mental health, and a half-time school counselor, the school district realized they needed to offer additional services for students who needed more intense mental health care. To meet this need, a partnership with a community counseling service and a licensed counselor was developed. The licensed counselor is at the school one to two times each week and is provided a private room to meet with students. The counseling center bills the student's health insurance for the service. Mrs. Rawson, the full-time school counselor, said the following about the need for the additional counseling services:

> Before our partnership with the counseling service, I would sometimes be all that these kids would have. Even though as a school counselor, I wasn't supposed to be giving therapy. But, I mean, some of these kids needed somebody to talk to, you know, and even if I was just a band aid for a little while, then, at least I was something. And it was difficult dealing with all the mental health things that were going on. I did have kids who needed therapy. Who either didn't have a ride, didn't have the resources, money, whatever. You've got to do something for those kids. And so, I would see them probably more than what a school counselor should have. When you're dealing with all of that, plus all of the other school counseling stuff, that's difficult, and it takes a toll on you.

Department of Rehabilitation Services

The school partners with the West Virginia Department of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) to offer students with disabilities services to help them transition from high school to the next stage of adult life. DRS has the following services available for students: job exploration counseling, work-based learning experiences, workplace readiness skills, self-advocacy

instruction, job search assistance, and postsecondary assistance (West Virginia Division of Rehabilitation Services, n.d.). Mrs. Rawson said the following about DRS:

> We do have the Department of Rehabilitation. She comes in and she'll work with students who have disabilities, it can be like ADHD disability, or it can be physical. It can be anxiety, and she can point them in the right direction for services. She has helped them with college prep stuff.

West Virginia School One – Opportunities

Many of the opportunities being offered for students in West Virginia School One were brought up and described throughout the focus group interviews with both students and adults as they talked about what they believe strengthens mental health and PYD. The major opportunities that emerged from focus group interviews, observations, and document analysis included: student leadership opportunities through student clubs and organizations; co-curricular and extracurricular activities; and college and career readiness opportunities. Bailey shared this about the opportunities available at her school, “Everything is important. There's like one thing here that's at least important to someone here.”

Student Leadership Opportunities

The school offers the following clubs and organizations: Art Club, Band Club, BETA, Choir Club, Drama Club, FBLA, FCA, FFA, Fishing Club, Math Club, National Technical Honor Society, ProStart, SAAD (Students Against Destructive Decisions), Spanish Club, Student Government, and Video/Audio Club. Mr. Wilson, school principal, shared how he has worked to add more clubs and organizations to the school and said, “We reinstituted Student Government. I thought that was very important.”

Co-Curricular and Extracurricular Activities

The school offers the following sports: Baseball, Boys' and Girls' Basketball, Cheerleading, Football, Soccer, Softball, and Volleyball. The school takes a lot of pride in their athletic programs and has been very successful. The students and the adults both made several comments on the importance of sports in their school. Carl personally shared, "For me personally, it just gives me something to look forward to. Athletics show that there's more to life than just coming to school and working. There's a fun side to life for me in that." Mark added:

> I think it builds character too. I mean, we're not always going to win games. It just teaches you how to face adversity and overcome that. I'm trying to get myself in habits now that I can apply later on in life, like being at practice every day, being at school every day.

Mr. Smith, the football coach, shared:

> As far as our football program, and I think every program here is the same way of, I want to get the kids going in the right direction. Everything else will work out and take care of itself. Just getting them in the right mindset, doing the right things, right attitudes, the right work ethic. Wins and losses will come.

The school has Art, Band, and Theater. Mr. Wilson shared his desire to connect kids with opportunities and how Band is one way he accomplishes this:

> Football and Band are two things that takes in a large number of kids. My job is to give you the resources to make your program the best it can be, because that's going to touch the lives of kids. Band is going to touch a lot.

Mr. Wilson further discussed his desire to get the Theater program thriving again, "What we're working on next is our Theater program. We are really trying to get that where it needs to be."

College and Career Readiness

The school offers the following CTE programs at the school: Agriculture – Plant Systems, Agriculture – Pet Grooming, Business Management, Education and Training, Finance, Health Sciences, Hospitality and Tourism, Information Technology, and Manufacturing. Students are able to ride a bus to the county CTE center and take additional programs not offered at their school. Andrew shared, "I think a lot of kids enjoy that they can take a bus up to the CTE Center and do those things that we don't have here."

The school has an articulation agreement with the local Community and Technical College and offers five dual credit college courses. The school offers 13 Advanced Placement (AP) in the Arts, English and Language Arts, History and Social Sciences, Math, and Science.

West Virginia School One Supports

The major supports provided in West Virginia School One to address student mental health and PYD include: Academic Supports, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, Culture of Intentional Support and Caring, Student Relationships with Caring Adults, and School Counselors.

Academic Supports

In an effort to relieve some of the pressure students feel about their school work and grades, the school has implemented several interventions aimed at supporting students academically. These supports include both times set aside during the school day and after school, for tutoring and catching up on school work. During both times, teachers are available to meet with students and provide assistance.

According to Mr. Wilson, the school principal, the school felt they could support more students if they started providing a time during the school day for students to receive one-on-one

or small group instruction from teachers and be provided an opportunity to catch up on school work or improve grades. Students who are behind or struggling in a class are required to attend the thirty-minute session with their teacher. Students who do not need this time, are able to go meet with their coach if they play sports, lift weights, practice Band, or go shoot basketball in the gym. Mark shared the following about this support, “We have Modules, it's like 30-40 minutes a day. Like if you're struggling in a certain subject you can go to that teacher and they'll help you. It helps out a lot actually.”

In addition to the time set aside during the school day to offer academic support, the school also provides after school support two evenings a week. This is an additional time where any student can choose to stay and get caught up on work and receive assistance from their teachers. During the current school year, because of COVID-19, the school district has been providing bus transportation for students participating in after school. Mrs. Miller connected her school’s after school academic support to building student confidence:

> One of the things we do that builds confidence is the after school program. In addition to the students who are failing and struggling, we are also seeing top students stay for extra help. And at the end of the day, when some of them leave here, they feel really accomplished and really proud of what they have accomplished that day.

There is also support for students who have failed courses and are behind on graduation credits. The school offers credit recovery using Plato software and currently has 20 students enrolled in the West Virginia Option Pathway. The Option Pathway is a West Virginia Department of Education initiative designed for high school students who have fallen behind their graduation cohort due to failing major core courses and are unable to graduate on time. The Option Pathway offers two options for students. Option One has two major components: students

are required to complete a CTE Pathway by passing four classes in a concentration and they must pass the Test Assessing Secondary Completion (TASC), with a minimum score of 500 on each of the five tests. Option Two is for seniors who have credit deficiencies in one core area. The students must pass the Test for Adult Basic Education (TABE) to gain entry into the program but they also have to pass the TASC for the one core area. Students who successfully complete the Option Pathway are able to receive their high school diploma and graduate on time with their graduating class.

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

The school implements a PBIS approach to discipline. The goal of PBIS is to make schools more effective in providing equitable and safe learning environments for all students. PBIS aims at decreasing aggressive conduct and bullying through improving the culture and climate of the school, building relationships with students and staff, changing academic outcomes, and increasing prosocial behaviors (WVDE, 2018).

Bailey shared a profound thought about her school and how for some students, it may be the only safe place in their life, “I feel some students can get away from those things at home by coming to school. This could be their safe place, you know.” Carl spoke directly about how his school handles discipline:

> Even with punishments, I feel like if you go to different schools it is more like, you did this, alright, your suspended. Here I feel like it's more they try not to focus on the punishment, they focus on the lesson part of it.

Robert added, “Their understanding, and they want to make sure you understand what you have done to be in that predicament.”

Culture of Intentional Support and Caring

The students and the adults both stressed how their school has a culture of intentional support and caring. Mr. Wilson, school principal, shared:

> I think it's a culture. I think we've tried to create a culture that our kids know that we care about them. That doesn't mean we're going to let you get your way. But we care about you. And we're going to redirect. And we try to provide all the resources that they may need, from food to counseling, to where if they need counseling outside of school, we are trying to provide those things. We've really tried to work on the interactions.

Speaking of students knowing they are supported at the school, Mr. Wilson additionally added, "I think again, it goes back to our culture. Our kids know that they can come to the office and talk to our counselors if they need to. And they feel comfortable in doing those things." Mrs. Rawson, school counselor, spoke of how teachers support students when they need to come and talk with a counselor, "Our teachers are really good to let the kids come and talk to us. I don't know that I've heard at all, in recent years, that a teacher would not let a student come out of class because they need to talk to a counselor." Mrs. Miller, assistance principal, spoke of the intentionality of building relationships, "Building relationships is the key I think, and just constantly having conversations and saying, 'We're here for you. How are you today?'"

From the student perspective, Betty shared, "We have a strong school. Great teachers, great administration. We have strong programs here with good people that are good examples for our students." Michelle said, "I feel like where we are kind of like a smaller high school, we all really have a good bond with each other. I guess because we are just tiny and know everybody, we just all kind of get along." Carl provided a specific example of the supportive and caring culture at his school:

> Around here, you see a lot of kids that come from poverty areas. They don't have as much. I've seen teachers and administrators bring in clothes and kind of pull them to the side, and not let it be known, that they're helping them out in that way.

Mark shared the following about how teachers go above and beyond showing students they care, "We have something called, Adopt-a-Senior. We have a teacher who goes into the community to collect money to purchase every graduating senior a gift. When you have teachers doing that, it just lets you know they care about you."

Student Relationships with Caring Adults

During the student focus group interviews, students often mentioned how supportive and caring the adults were in the school, including counselors, coaches, teachers, and administration. Betty said:

> I think our counselors are really good here. If we ever need encouragement, or any anything, or if we are going through a difficult time, we can talk to them about it and get advice. If you ever need to come in and talk, it will be completely confidential.

Mark shared, "I mean, our coaches, man, they're great examples. It's not all about sports for them. I mean, they'll even tell you, they're just trying to teach us about life as far as that goes, it's more than sports." Carl added, "We have a coach on the basketball team, he's almost like a father figure to everybody."

The students shared a lot about how caring and supportive their teachers were. Michelle shared, "You can go up to about any teacher and I ask them questions or anything that you need, and I am sure they will do their very best to try to help you." Betty added, "I have seen teachers, before, if sometimes the happier student or someone you see who is outgoing, if they are like being quiet, they'll ask if they're okay or if they need to talk about anything." Kristen said,

“Some teachers give you days to catch up on work so it won’t be so stressful.” Carl said, “I don't think there's a teacher in this school that would ignore a student struggling.” Mark added, “They are not just here to do their job, they're here to do more than that. They actually care about you here.” Mark mentioned the teacher support at sporting events, “Most of them come to the games.”

Students also shared thoughts on the support and understanding of their school administration. Betty said, “If you needed anything, our administration will try their best to help you in all aspects.” Mark shared, “I mean, even our principal, man I mean, he’s awesome. He's a down to Earth guy. I mean, he's cool. He may be the head dog, but he acts like just like one of us.”

School Counselors

The school has one full time and one half time school counselor. The counselors work diligently to stay connected with students and offer support. The counselors have a website and use Facebook to distribute information to students and families, including information about upcoming events and deadlines, articles on coping with stress and anxiety, mental health counseling availability, and credit recovery opportunities. The school counselors also coordinate school assemblies to address subjects, such as drugs, drunk driving, suicide, and mental health. Gina shared the following about how her school counselors connect with students, “Our counselors, they always message us on Live Grades and ask us if we need anything. They give us their numbers and give us a way to email them or message them somehow.”

West Virginia School Two – Services

The major services being implemented in West Virginia School Two to address student mental health and PYD include: food distribution, after-school and summer school, school-based

social worker and school-based mental health counselor. Mr. Stone, school principal, shared the following about the shifting focus at the school when it comes to offering mental health services:

> The priority is shifting, I don't know if it's at the top of the list yet, but I think it's moving up rapidly. I give the superintendent credit, he identified the problem, you know, the money was available, he put people in positions where they could help.

Food Distribution

In addition to providing free and reduced breakfast and lunch to students, the school also provides additional food to students in the form snacks provided during after school and summer school programs, a weekend back-pack food program for those who need it, and a summer meal service program. During the current year, because of COVID-19, food was made available for virtual students to come to the school and pick up.

After School and Summer School Programs

The school is a 21st Century Community Learning Center (CCLC). A major part of CCLC program at the school is after school tutoring. The tutoring sessions are every evening of the week, except Wednesdays, for one hour. The goal of the tutoring is to help any student who needs assistance in getting classwork completed. Students are able to make-up tests and work with computers to do research and homework. Tutoring is available in Math, Science, and English. School bus transportation is made available to students.

For summer, 2021, the school is offering a three-week summer exploration camp. The learning will be hands-on and exploratory and focused on careers. The West Virginia Office of Rehabilitation Services will also be offering career exploration sessions during the camp to mostly students with disabilities, but a Job Club will be offered to all students. The school is also

providing credit recovery options during the summer camp for students who failed core courses during the 2020-21 school year.

School-Based Social Worker

The school has a social worker on site. Mrs. Staats was hired at the beginning of the 2020-21 school year and has an office in the CTE building at the school. During her first year, she has spent a considerable amount of her time building relationships with students, faculty, and families. She spent a lot of the past school year making phone calls and home visits in an effort to get students to return to school after being remote for so long due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Mrs. Staats duties at the school include conducting small group sessions focused on the following: life skills, substance abuse awareness, healthy relationships, coping skills, team building, and daily living.

Mrs. Staats works closely with the mental health therapist assigned to the school in working with students who need additional social-emotional learning services and supports. She is working with students to develop a clothes and personal hygiene closet for students who need those resources. Shawna shared:

> And I don't really want to say this, because like, you're a guy, but like, I feel like if I need to find some feminine products, I don't care to go to them. Like I don't feel awkward to go to them.

In her office, Mrs. Staats allows students to paint a block on the wall to express their feelings. In addition to her office, there is also a small group meeting room nearby with the following group ground rules written on a white board: what's said in here, stays in here; be respectful to fellow group members; we accept everyone just as they are now; everyone gets an

opportunity to share; listen with an open mind; listen to understand; our goal is for every member to leave feeling better than they did walking in; and no phones.

School-based Mental Health Counselor

The school district hired a mental health counselor to work with schools. Mrs. Taylor is in her second year in the role and works at the school two to three days a week. She currently spends time at additional schools in the district. The job description for this role indicates that the school-based mental health counselor provides mental health counseling and related services to adolescents, children, and families in an outpatient, school-based setting. The counselor provides consultation services to school staff to support the overall mental health goals of the school district. The position requires a Masters' degree in mental health counseling.

The impact for some students of having a school-based mental health counselor at the school was evident. Wanda shared, "I talk to Mrs. Taylor constantly about everything. She is practically my mother. She is really nice." Jan shared a personal story that speaks to the importance of making this service available for free in the school, "I was going to get a therapist, but like, they just cost too much money. And I can't spend all my money just to talk with someone." Mrs. Taylor shared the following about the progress she is witnessing:

> We're making leaps and bounds in the right direction. I think the next step we need to take is just to keep shedding the light on the importance of mental health, and losing the stigma associated with mental health. We need to normalize mental health.

Mrs. Taylor maintains a blog site on the school website where she addresses various mental health issues and concerns on a regular basis. The purpose of the blog is to make more people aware of the mental services at the school and to accomplish the goal of removing the stigma attached to mental health.

West Virginia School Two – Opportunities

Many of the opportunities being offered for students in West Virginia School Two were brought up and described throughout the focus group interviews with both students and adults as they talked about what they believe strengthens mental health and PYD. The major opportunities that emerged from focus group interviews, observations, and document analysis included: student leadership opportunities through student clubs and organizations; JROTC; co-curricular and extracurricular activities; and college and career readiness opportunities.

Student Leadership Opportunities

The school offers the following clubs and organizations: Art Club, BETA Club, Bible Club, Drama Club, FFA, National Honors Society, RAZE (Tear Down Tobacco Lies), Skills USA, and TRIO Upward Bound.

JROTC

The school offers a U.S. Army Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) program that both students and adults attribute to changing the lives of many students. Roger said, "It's like the biggest thing here." Erika added, "They're the ones who used to get in a lot of trouble, and now they don't, because they have something to look forward to." Mrs. Flinn shared, "I think JROTC, just by the number of students they have, and especially some of the students who need more firm guidance, is an important opportunity here. Students can find direction and they have that strong father figure, that they need."

Co-curricular and Extracurricular Activities

The school offers the following sports: Baseball, Boys' and Girls' Basketball, Cheerleading, Cross Country, Football, Softball, and Volleyball. The school takes a lot of pride in their athletic programs and has been very successful. The students and the adults both made

several comments on the importance of sports in their school. Amy said "I believe our sports make a difference because a lot of kids stay out of trouble and keep themselves on track." Mr. Legg, teacher and athletic director, shared, "We have 362 kids, and we have 211 athletes, two thirds play something."

The school has Art, Choir, and Drama. Jan shared the following about the importance of Drama, "Drama is really a good one too. Because you have different cliques that come together in Drama."

College and Career Readiness

The school offers the following CTE programs at the school: Agriculture, Business Management, Carpentry, Health Occupations, Integrated Production Technology, JROTC, Prostart Restaurant Management, and Welding Technology. Mr. Legg, CTE teacher, said, "I think our CTE community, which entails JROTC, is valuable to this school. We have 86% of our students here in a CTE program. We are double what the county is." The school offers five Advanced Placement (AP) courses at the school and 14 programs online.

West Virginia School Two – Supports

The major supports provided in West Virginia School Two to address student mental health and PYD include: Academic Supports and Student Relationships with Caring Adults.

Academic Supports

In addition to offering after-school tutoring for students as part of the 21st CCLC program, the school also offers the WV Option Pathway and a 20/20 Graduation Specialist at the school.

WV Graduation 20/20 is a program developed by the West Virginia Department of Education designed to improve results of youth with disabilities in public schools (WVDE,

2018). The program was specifically created “to assist in building capacity to increase the high school completion rate for ALL students with special emphasis on students with disabilities and those of low socioeconomic status” (WVDE, 2018, p. 3). The goals of the program include: improved student literacy and numeracy, increased number of students who graduate with a regular diploma, decreased number of students who drop out, and increased attainment of postsecondary outcomes (WVDE, 2018). The WV Graduation 20/20 school specialists are based in schools and conduct school level team meetings monthly, ensure appropriate time for activities, and collects and analyzes data (WVDE, 2018).

Student Relationships with Caring Adults

During the student focus group interviews, students and adults mentioned some examples of supportive and caring adults in the school, including teachers, counselors, and coaches. Wanda shared a personal story about how a teacher showing vulnerability had a positive impact on her, “I personally like Mrs. White, she will tell stories sometimes, about herself and her struggles and stuff. So, it makes you feel a lot better to know that, like an older person struggles too.” Mrs. Flinn shared, “The students have their specific teachers that they know they're comfortable with. And so, they know pretty quickly early on in their high school career, who they're comfortable with.” Jan shared the following about a school counselor:

> There was one specific counselor who really focused on mental health of kids. She would take them out of class and talk to them. She would even talk to a teacher if you were having a hard time in a class. She was a really good counselor.

Chapter 5 - **Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations**

In reality, this was two research studies in one. Student mental health could have easily been a stand-alone study. However, as an asset-based approach to youth development, the six constructs of Positive Youth Development (PYD): confidence, competence, connection, character, compassion, and contribution, are strongly connected to youth mental health. This study was about exploring how students and school staff perceive student mental health, how students and staff perceive the level of student PYD, and how schools are addressing mental health problems and strengthening PYD through school-based services, opportunities, and supports. Each are an important component in understanding the bigger picture of student mental health and PYD in ways that impact implementation of practice and future research.

Results from the initial CES Depression (CES-D) and Positive Youth Development (PYD) student surveys from the four schools in this study will be provided at appropriate times in the conclusions. The possible range of scores for the total depression score were zero to 60, with higher scores on each question and a higher overall score indicating the presence of more depression. Higher scores on each PYD question and higher overall PYD scores indicate a stronger individual possession of that specific PYD construct.

Conclusions

Student Mental Health Context - Research Question One

The context of this entire study involved high school students attending rural, low SES high schools. The first research question sought to set the context for the mental health of students attending rural, low SES high schools by discovering what factors students and school staff identify as contributors to mental health problems youth are experiencing and what specific mental health issues they believe students struggle with the most.

The findings from this research question aligned with what much of prior research has said about rural students and schools, as many rural schools are facing "nothing less than an emergency in education and well-being of children" (Showalter et al., 2019, p.1). However, being a student in a rural, low SES school does not automatically mean one is impacted by the societal factors associated with poor rural and town locales, such as abuse, drug addicted parents, or single-parent households. It is also important to note that mental health is individualized. Therefore, as will be discussed later, many of the mental health initiatives involve a targeted and individualized approach. In no way does this study reveal or suggest that all students struggle with their mental health. There are many students attending rural, low SES high schools who possess and maintain relatively strong mental health, with solid coping skills. One must also realize that mental health can shift with circumstances and environment.

This collective case study was delimited to four rural, low SES schools during the spring semester of the 2020-21 school year, so it is just a snapshot into the reality of a group of high school students during a small part of their life and school journey. Through working diligently with the school principals at each of the four schools to create diverse student focus groups representing the entire student body; including students who had struggled socially and emotionally and students who were considered socially and emotionally thriving, the study was able to uncover additional mental health factors not necessarily connected with the rural, low SES context.

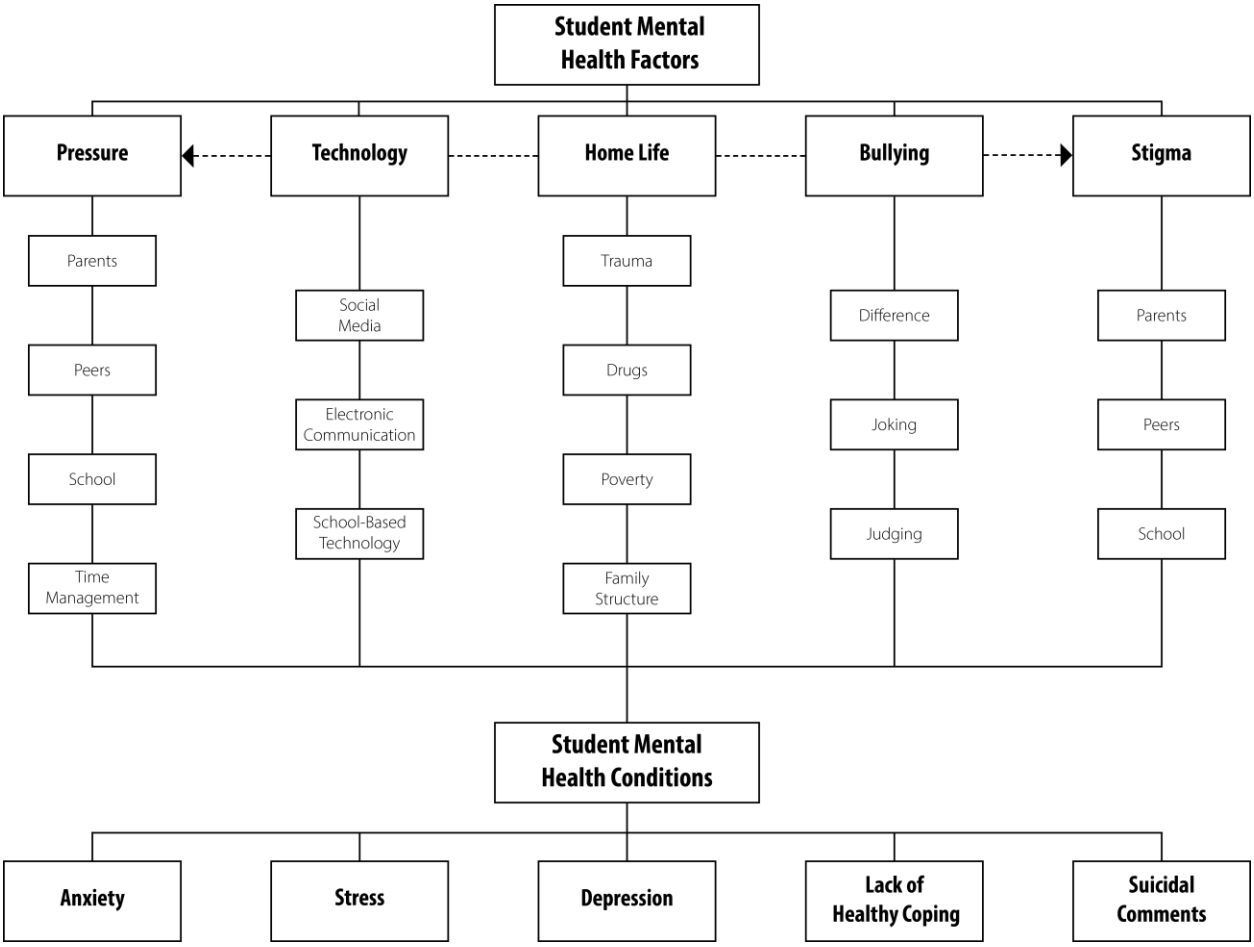
The World Health Organization (WHO) indicates there are multiple factors that can determine mental health outcomes, including "desire for greater autonomy, pressure to conform with peers, exploration of sexual identity, and increased access to and use of technology" (WHO, 2020, Mental Health Determinants section, para. 2). Additional determinants of adolescent

mental health the WHO recognizes is quality of home life and peer relations. “Violence (including harsh parenting and bullying) and socioeconomic problems are recognized risks to mental health” (WHO, 2020, Mental Health Determinants section, para. 2). According to the WHO, some youth are at a greater risk of mental health conditions because of their living conditions, mental health stigma, and lack of access to mental health services and supports (WHO, 2020). Every one of the factors recognized by the WHO as determinants of mental health, emerged from this study in some form; either as a theme, sub theme, or participant comment.

The overwhelming factor identified as impacting student mental health was pressure. This theme of pressure also intersected the additional four themes that emerged for the mental health factors: home life, technology, bullying, and stigma. A summary of the major themes and subthemes for research question one (See Figure 5.1) help conceptualize the interconnectedness between the mental health factors and conditions. When breaking it down further, it appears one or more of these four factors has the potential to create an atmosphere of pressure for all students, while the four subthemes that emerged from the pressure factor; parents, peers, school, and time management, represent specific individuals or obligations in the life of student identified as applying or adding to the pressure students feel.

Figure 5.1.

Summary of Student Mental Health Themes and Subthemes for Research Question One



Pressure

Students overwhelmingly talked about how much pressure they have as a young person. Students admitted this pressure can be felt internally, but most of the students addressed the pressure they have from outside sources: parents, peers, school, and time management. Not every student has a bad home life. Not every student gets bullied. It does appear, however, that almost every high school student feels some type of pressure. One school principal shared he believes at least 80% of the students in his school are not coping well with this pressure. Much of the

pressure students feel involves navigating the space between what others expect of them and what they want to see happen for their own lives.

Students feel the pressure of meeting expectations parents have for their life, whether that is going to college, seeking a certain career, or simply, the friends they keep. Students struggle to meet these parental expectations, while also trying to establish their own autonomy and identity. The girls talked about the pressure from their parents to make good grades. Due to the home life environment of many students, some of the parental pressure involves the need to step up and serve in an adult role in the home. Roger described this pressure the following way, "The external factors also, like work, parents breathing down your neck. Maybe you have to be like a second parent at your house. Like maybe you have to watch your younger siblings or something."

Students feel pressure from their peers in different ways. Students worry about fitting in and being accepted by others in a school environment. Being popular among one's friends is a desire of many students, yet students worry when they think they are not as popular as someone else. Riley described this pressure by saying, "There's pressure to be the best, you know, you got the popular people. And if you're not like them, then you are alone at school and stuff like that." Some of the male students pointed out that young men experience pressure from their friend group to participate in risk-taking behaviors, such as drinking and taking drugs.

In this study, school pressure emerged as a specific type of pressure, and students attributed parents and the adults in their school for putting this pressure on them. This pressure was centered around class work load, expectations, and grades. The comments these students made about school pressure aligned with an international study conducted by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) involving 72 countries and consisting of

540,000 students aged 15-16 years old, where 66% of students reported feeling stressed about poor grades, 59% reported worry about taking tests, 37% reported feeling very tense when studying, with girls consistently reporting greater anxiety with school work than boys (OECD, 2017).

In addition to parents putting the academic pressure on, students also feel pressure at school to perform well on standardized tests, AP exams, maintain good grades, and to have a plan for their future. Jan shared, “You have to basically plan your whole life out before graduation. Because older people think that once you graduate, you’re going to amount to nothing if you don’t have a certain plan.” As a teacher, Mrs. Love realizes this pressure, “And I do think that the kids feel like they have to be successful, they do not want to fail.”

The pressures of school collide with after school obligations for many students causing time management problems. Many students talked about how they feel they never get a break, because after attending school all day, they have to work at a job, attend a sports practice, do their homework, and try to get some rest. Randee shared, “I struggle with time.” Ethan said:

> I think that we don't have time to do stuff. We go to school, and then some people do after school activities that are related to school, like sports and stuff. And then there's also homework. I go home sometimes and have five hours of homework to do. And you know, if you combine that with other stuff, it makes it hard to have a personal life.

Home Life

This is the one major theme most connected to the context of the rural, low SES school. Home life is a potential mental health determinant for all students, however, the home life of rural students experiencing poverty can be very traumatic. School-aged children spend a lot of their time in school during the week, but they still spend the greater portion of their time at

home. For many rural students, instead of serving as a safe haven and place of support, home has become a source of trauma, enormous pressure, and at times, a nightmare. Home life emerged as a major theme for factors contributing to poor mental health in students. Obviously, not every student who enters the doors of the school has a traumatic home life, however, when one looks at the statistics of rural communities, one realizes the number is drastically increasing.

The home life subthemes that emerged; trauma, poverty, drug abuse, and family structure, expose a reality that exists for too many youths and these sub themes were consistent with rural education research. Critical social issues facing rural schools today include: students with adverse childhood experiences, poverty and food insecurity, drug and alcohol abuse, poor mental health, lack of access and availability of important services and supports for mental health and overall well-being, and student mobility (Beesley et al., 2010; Gale et al., 2019; Schafft, 2003; Showalter et al., 2019).

With the increase of drug incarcerations and overdose deaths, many grandparents are taking over the leadership in the household. In this study, this reality was brought to light in the two West Virginia schools, which was also supported with the data from their respective communities. Students and school staff discussed the shift in the family structure caused by the drug abuse epidemic and also indicated that grandparents are not as equipped to raise teenagers in today's world. Mrs. Lamb said:

> Well, in our area, we have more than half of our kids being raised by someone other than the parent. In some instances, those parents have overdosed, they're in jail. Usually it has something to do with, you know, some kind of drug related thing because we have the opioid crisis. And I just don't think in a lot of instances, our grandparents are equipped to raise teenagers, especially with social media.

This is consistent with prior research that indicates grandparents struggle raising their own grandchildren because it is unplanned, disruptive to their life, a financial strain, and carries a social stigma (Smith & Palmieri, 2007).

Technology

The theme of technology is another example of a theme experienced by most students in the 21st century and not just students attending rural, low SES high schools. Students and school staff identified social media, electronic communication, and school-based technology as the three sub themes of the technology theme.

Students connected social media back to the pressure theme and shared that they feel pressure to post items on social media platforms. Social media was also linked to a lack of self-confidence in students because they feel their life does not measure up to the exciting lives of others. Mary shared, "People see others in this positive way and don't realize that everyone has negatives in their life." Mrs. Lamb connected social media to the self-worth of students, "We have so many kids who get their sense of self-worth by what they see on social media." Students and adults distinguished between the impact social media has on student mental health and the impact of communicating electronically. Students and school staff associated weaker social skills with the amount of time students spend on a computer, phone, and technology in general.

An interesting sub theme that emerged was how school-based technology adds to the problem instead of improving it. Every school in this study had one-to-one student technology and students shared that because most, if not all, school work is now online, they are never able to get a break from technology use and it actually exacerbates their social awkwardness. In their study, Twenge et al. (2018), concluded that "adolescents who spent more time on screen activities were significantly more likely to have high depressive symptoms or at least one

suicide-related outcome, and those who spend more time on non-screen activities were less likely" (p. 9).

Bullying

It was obvious in this research study, that great strides have been made in reducing bullying in schools, because even though it emerged as a theme, it did not emerge as strongly as the other themes did, and physical bullying was not mentioned. However, students in all four schools alluded to the fact that bullying still takes place and is experienced by some students. Students identified the type of student in their school who gets bullied. Consistently, it was brought out that any student who is different, typically gets bullied. This difference could be emotional, socioeconomical, or racial. Based on discussions with students and adults, it also became clear that students who struggle with their mental health are subject to some discrimination and stigma from their peers. Mrs. Starcher shared, "Coming from a rural community, students are not always sympathetic or empathetic about mental health issues." Youth with mental health issues are more vulnerable to "social exclusion, discrimination, and stigma" (WHO, 2020, Mental Health Determinants section, para. 4). It appeared that any new student moving into a rural school is subject to some type of bullying. This struggle to accept people who are different or are outsiders is a rural challenge as the research indicates rural folk tend to have a "distrust of outsiders" (Slama, 2004, p. 1).

Students only identified two ways students get bullied: joking and judging. In these smaller, rural schools, there appears to still be a lot of verbal joking and name calling. Students also mentioned this negative talk happens on social media platforms too. Bailey shared, "I've seen bullying happen on social media. Just people commenting bad things on other people's posts." Some students believed bullying came in the form of judging others. This judging wasn't

always verbal, but many students still perceived it existed and that many students can be judgmental towards others. This concept of judging others is connected to themes related to accepting others, which emerged with various PYD constructs and many students expressed how students feel judged if they have mental health issues, which only adds to more stigma.

Stigma

The theme of mental health stigma is consistent with prior research concerning rural communities and schools. Rural community research has revealed the complexity of mental health stigma, as people in rural communities have unfortunately believed misconceptions, stereotypes, and prejudices about mental health which has only worked to reinforce the feelings of shame and failure in the people who are experiencing mental health problems (Gale et al., 2019).

The pressure theme intersects with all the major themes, but it can potentially have the most devastating effects when combined with the theme of stigma. Three of the four subthemes for pressure; parents, peers, and school were also identified as sources of mental health stigma. The combination of pressure and stigma in the home and school creates an atmosphere where, if students are struggling internally, they feel they have no one to talk to about their problems because they are afraid others will think they are weak or that they will be judged. Jan shared a revealing story:

> My parents don't believe in it all. And like, one time when I had a really rough time, they were so rough on me about it. So, like, I can never talk to them. And it's hard to talk to my friends because I tell them my emotions a lot, and I feel like it's just a burden. So, I like to keep stuff to myself.

Student Mental Health Conditions

When all the pressure a student experiences builds up, and one or more of the other mental health factors are involved, students feel overwhelmed and mental health conditions, such as stress, anxiety, and depression emerge. Students and school staff collectively identified anxiety, depression, stress, lack of healthy coping, and suicidal comments, as the mental health issues they feel students are experiencing the most in their school. Anxiety and depression were mentioned the most during focus group interviews, which aligns with prior research that found depression and anxiety problems to be most prevalent in adolescents 12-17 years of age and the prevalence of depression higher among children living in poor households (Ghandour et al., 2019).

It is important to attempt to separate out some linkages between specific mental health factors identified and the mental health conditions that emerged. Based on the focus group transcripts with students, most of the anxiety and stress students feel, can be linked to the pressure they experience. John shared, “Around this age, a lot of students gain really anxious symptoms. Especially in high school, where societal standard really matters, where you stand. And popularity too.” Anxiety was also linked to the struggle students have of managing their time and maintaining life balance. Shawna shared the following about athletes at her school, “Anyone who’s a student athlete has anxiety. We love what we do, but it’s stressful because you try to balance it with everything else you do.” When students talked about stress, they always connected it with school work and grades. Carrie said, “Some students are overwhelmed with school work and it makes them feel stressed and like they can’t do it.”

As indicated earlier, mental health is individualized. Anxiety, stress, depression, and suicidal comments can also be linked to any of the other mental health factors that emerged in

this study. As already mentioned, screen time on technology has been linked to depression and suicidal thoughts. Kids who are bullied are more likely to experience depression and anxiety (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Kids who are bullied are at risk of suicide, but bullying alone is not the cause. Other issues contributing to suicide risk include: depression, home life issues, and trauma (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2021).

In rural, low SES schools, it is also important to link anxiety, stress, depression, suicidal comments, and lack of healthy coping to the context of rural, low SES communities. Children who experience poverty are more likely to experience mental health challenges (Lenardson et al., 2010; Nichols et al., 2017; Showalter et al., 2019). Children living in rural counties are more likely to be physically, sexually, and emotionally abused than children living in urban and large metropolitan areas (Sedlak et al., 2010). For many students in these rural, low SES schools, their mental health struggles can be directly linked to the trauma they have experienced in their home in the form of adverse childhood experiences.

When the factor of mental health stigma is factored in at rural, low SES schools, this equates to many students not receiving the help they need to process their anxious, stressful, depressive, and suicidal feelings. Without this support, many students turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms. During focus group interviews, it was shared that students struggle coping and typically either joke about their feelings or turn to risk-taking behaviors to cope. Mrs. Staats said, “Coping skills, they don't know how to cope with anything. I think they really just don't know how to deal with a lot. Like they don't know how to actually feel anything fully. They laugh it off.” Kasey shared, “I think a lot of kids in our school, cope with joking about things.” Vaping

was one of the more common risk-taking behaviors mentioned by students. Amy explained how a student can get to the point of engaging in risk-taking behavior to cope:

> You have a kid that is overly stressed, it's going to force them to want to do something bad to take it away and calm them down. That's what people don't understand. Whenever you're pushed to the limit, you just want to do something at that point to make yourself feel free or to have that feeling of freedom and control over your life again.

Research indicates, rural youth are more likely than their urban peers to engage in risky drug and alcohol-related behavior, including binge drinking, driving under the influence, and meth use (Gale et al., 2019). The rates of serious mental illnesses, depression, and suicide are higher among students in rural areas than in urban (Gale et al., 2019).

Context of Positive Youth Development (PYD)– Research Question Two

The second research question centered around students and school staff describing the levels of the six constructs of PYD confidence, competence, connection, character, compassion/caring, and contribution, of students in their school and how their school works to build and develop these characteristics. Each of the six PYD constructs were divided into two major themes a priori, student level and school actions. Sub-themes emerged in vivo from both the student level and school actions for each PYD construct. A summary of the major themes and subthemes for research question two (See Figure 5.2) helps illustrate the differences and similarities between each PYD construct.

Figure 5.2.

Summary of PYD Themes and Subthemes for Research Question Two

	Student Level	School Actions
Confidence	• Varies with student • Linked to academics • Self-identity & worth	• Words of affirmation & encouragement • Diverse school opportunities
Competence	• School subject-centered • Linked to school-based opportunities • Social competence	• Teacher actions • Hands-on classes • College & career ready opportunities • Student voice • Success & recognition
Connection	• Friend Group • Teachers	• Adult intentionality • Student voice • Student organizations • Extracurricular activities • Trauma informed discipline
Character	• Acceptance of others • Respect for others • Behavior • Accountability • Connected to home life	• Adult modeling • School focus • Character-based clubs
Compassion	• Varies with students • Linked to positive behavior • Understanding & acceptance	• Teacher modeling • School focus
Contribution	• Volunteerism	• Community service/service learning • School & community modeling

Confidence

Student Level

Confidence is defined as the perception that one can achieve desired goals through one's actions (Lerner, 2007). The PYD construct of confidence centers around the appearance, self-

worth, and positive identity of an individual (Geldhof et al., 2014). The following three sub themes emerged under student level of confidence: varies with student, linked to academics, and self-identity and worth. The students had difficulty keeping their thoughts on confidence separate from competence. This was to be expected as the two are interconnected and as Lerner (2007) indicates, “The more competent you are, the more likely it is that you’ll feel confident. In turn, confidence can reinforce competence” (p. 76). The findings of this study are supported by confidence research that indicates youth experience confidence levels differently in different situations or classes; it varies between individuals, is especially linked to age and maturity; and is based on what they place value on, including their self (Lerner, 2007).

This construct of PYD is closely linked to student mental health, as lacking self-confidence can lead to additional negative feelings about oneself. Student confidence and the school pressure they feel is interconnected as many students linked their confidence to academic performance. Jerry said, “I would say there's some confidence, but, it depends on what they're doing. If it's like a test, there's low confidence there.” Andrew was more specific, “It depends on the class you are in too. Well, I'm very confident in math, math is my best subject, but English, I just lose it all.” Some students realized there is a difference of confidence between grade levels in their school. Kim shared, “I feel like my junior class has a lot of confident people. Whereas I feel like their sophomore class is a little less confident.” Students and adults connected lack of confidence to home life for some students. Mr. Lance said, “A lot of that comes from home environment, too. They don't have the confidence from their own parents or people who are in the household that are living in a poor environment, or just poverty in general, it's hard to have confidence.”

For some of the girls, positive identity and self-worth were strongly connected to physical looks. Shawna personally shared, “I feel like my identity is how smart you are and how you look. That’s about it.” Many of the students shared that high school students are really just trying to find their identity and worth and that during that struggle, confidence is sometime weak. Carrie shared, “Like more students are trying to figure out like, what style they like to wear, what their sexuality is, and how to love themselves. To not care what anybody else has to say about them.” There was stark difference in confidence between the genders. Male students (n=32) had a mean confidence score of 68.85, female students (n=42) had a mean confidence score of 55.48, and non-binary students (n=1) had a mean confidence score of 20.00. Confidence was the second lowest scoring construct on the PYD survey, with a mean score of 61.01.

School Actions

Students and school staff were asked to identify what their school does to build and develop confidence in students. The research on how to support and nurture the confidence of youth indicates the importance of positive and sustaining adult relationships (Lerner, 2007). The research also indicates that youth must be directed to activities where they can use their strengths and talents (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007b). The two sub-themes that emerged were consistent with the literature: words of affirmation and encouragement from adults, and diverse opportunities.

Students truly treasure the words of affirmation and encouragement from the adults at their school. These words can be verbal from teachers, as Jan shared, “If he can tell that you’re not doing good on an exam, he will tell you that you’re brilliant, and that you got this, that you just need to work on some things.” Sometimes the written word can be just as powerful, as Riley

shared, “Even a little comment on a test or something that said, ‘Good Job!’ That builds my confidence.”

In addition to these affirming words, the adults in the school must connect students with opportunities to gain and build confidence. Mr. Hinkle said, “We want 100% of our kids involved in some activity. That's one of our big things we are trying to do. We're trying to get them all involved, so hopefully the academic piece comes up.” When working with youth, adults need to encourage them to dream about their future and plan for it by setting goals, as well as direct them to activities where they can use their strengths and talents (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007b). These opportunities can be co-curricular or extracurricular as long the student is given an opportunity to grow and develop. Carrie shared, “So also, like with sports, you don't have the tryouts. Like if you want to try something new, you get to be on a team.” Mary said:

> At our age, we are still trying to figure out what our skills are, what we like to do, you know. I feel like there is something here for everyone: Theater, the LGBTQ club, Spanish club, Choir, Band, FFA, Student Council, just so you can figure out like, what you're good at and what you enjoy.

Several students mentioned the impact Career Technical Education (CTE) courses have on student confidence. Chris said, “We have a lot of career classes. Maybe if you want to go into a career, it can, the classes we have here, can give you an experience of that career before you even get into it in the future.” These comments on the impact CTE has on confidence were supported by the results of the PYD survey. CTE students (n=63) had a mean confidence score of 62.28 while non-CTE students (n=13) had a mean confidence score of 54.87.

Competence

Student Level

The coding for student competence level generated three sub themes: school subject-centered, linked to school-based opportunities, and social competence. These findings are supported by student competence research that indicates competence is about what one can do. Youth may demonstrate competence in five ways: academically, cognitively, socially, emotionally, and vocationally (Lerner, 2007). Grades, social acceptance, and athletic competence also play a role in student competence (Geldhof et al., 2014). Competence was the lowest scoring construct on the PYD survey, with a mean score of 59.61.

Students connected this PYD construct to their school work and classes, like they did with the confidence construct, but in a different way. Students discussed how they lack competence in certain academic subjects, like math, but indicated that competence is typically stronger for students enrolled in CTE classes. Ashley said the following about the impact of CTE classes, “I feel like if they have a certain career path they want to go into, they do have a lot of competence just because of how many classes that we have that can get them ready for that.”

Since students can display competence in several ways, it makes sense why they attributed the various school-based activities they are involved in with their competence. Bailey shared, “I think everyone has their talents. Because there's some people that play football or play volleyball, and that's their talent. And there are some people that are in band, and that's their talent. Some people are gifted in cooking.” Mrs. Starcher shared, “Since there are lots of opportunities, I do feel like our students have at least one thing that they pull from and feel competent at.”

Social competence is a component of overall student competence, and students and adults did discuss this aspect. The discussion on social competence indicated that most students are struggling in this area. Kim shared, “If you're not in the ‘in’ crowd, it seems like you're like not accepted at all. You don't like feel comfortable going and doing stuff in that social atmosphere because you've never been accepted there.” Mrs. Ray said, “We have so many students that do not engage socially in a positive way. Many students feel too awkward and that nobody wants to be around them.”

School Actions

When asked about what their school does to build and development competence, the students and school staff provided many different examples. The following five sub-themes emerged: teacher actions, hands-on classes, college and career ready opportunities, student voice, and success and recognition. These five areas align very well with research on student competence. Specific social competency assets students need, include planning and decision making, interpersonal relationship skills, and cultural competence (Search Institute, 2006). When working directly with youth, adults can nurture competence by helping the young person recognize their strengths, talents, and abilities, and directing them to opportunities where they can build competencies that enhance their school, social, and community experiences (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007b).

The interactions students have with teachers are so critical in building competence. It can be as simple as an encouraging word or when a teacher respects and values the opinion of the student. One of the most important things a teacher can do is engage students in their classrooms and direct them to school-based opportunities where students can use their strengths and talents to grow and development. Although many academic classes were associated with low confidence

and competence, students shared that hands-on classes, such as CTE and the Arts, build student competence. Kristen spoke of why CTE classes are effective, “They work with you until you are good at it.” Sarah said, “I feel like it gives a student more experience and more on a higher level of knowing how to figure something out.” Mr. Wilson realized the importance of hands-on classes and commented, “We do not have enough avenues for our kids to express their competence. We don't have enough, we need more hands-on type programs.”

Students also indicated that when schools provide students with a platform for their voice to be heard, competence is strengthened. Betty shared, “You can even take the ideas that you have, I like this, this and this, and the teachers here will help you try to put it together. They want school, to be like, adapted to you.” This is supported by the framework of self-determination theory (SDT) in which Ryan and Deci (2000) posit that intrinsic motivation is nurtured and enhanced when the three psychological needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy are met for an individual.

Connection

Student Level

The PYD construct of connection is focused on mutual relationships students build with family members, friends, teachers, coaches, mentors, and community members (Lerner, 2007). The feelings of connection possessed by students came from multiples sources. The following two sub-themes emerged: friend group and teachers. As expected the students discussed their connection with peers the most and adults discussed more about the school and community connection. The concept of having a friend group in the school emerged from all four schools. Some of the schools indicated an environment where cliques are present, while others shared they had friend groups, but no cliques.

Depending upon the school, the impact of attending a small school varied. Some expressed how their small school made students feel more connected, while others expressed some negative consequences of the size of the school on connection. Bailey shared, “Everybody is just really accepting. And everyone talks to everyone. Like I said before, everyone’s friends with everyone.” Tommy said, “Because you're in a small school, everybody knows what kind of groups you're with. So, they can judge you by that and decide whether or not they can talk to you, or if they want to hang out with you.” It also became clear that students who are considered outsiders or different do not feel as connected to others in their school. Jerry shared:

> I’d just say for me in general, it’s really been a struggle trying to make connections with kids. That’s just because I’ve come from a different way of life from them or they’ve been raised, as in my terms, as city kids. I’ve been raised on a farm.

Mr. Bliss said, “I think where we run into some disconnect is with the kids that transfer in. There are some that are considered outsiders and maybe not given a chance, especially if they're a little bit different.”

Some of the students indicated they feel more of a connection with their teachers than friends. Arlee said, “Connection with the teachers is easy, because they're very open. Connection with the students, there's a whole other story.” Arlee was a transfer student from a larger city and was treated like an outsider in her school. Mr. Bliss shared, “I don't think that there's a single kid in our building that has sought out relationships with the adults in this building and has come up empty. To my knowledge.”

Based on the PYD results, it was obvious that some students in a rural, low SES do not feel as connected as others. Male students (n=32) had mean connection score of 67.97, female students (n=43) had a mean connection score of 60.00, and non-binary students (n=1) had a

mean connection score of 45.00. When it came to race, Black students (*n*=1) had mean connection score of 77.50, White students (*n*=56) had a mean connection score of 66.03, Multiracial or Biracial students (*n*=5) had a mean connection score of 56.50, Hispanic students (*n*=7) had a mean connection score of 51.79, Native American students (*n*=1) had a mean connection score of 47.50, and Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander students (*n*=1) had a mean connection score of 42.50.

School Actions

School staff and students shared various thoughts on how their school builds and develops a sense of connection among students. The following five subthemes emerged: adult intentionality, student voice, student organizations, extracurricular activities, and trauma informed discipline. These five subthemes align with the research literature that indicates youth can "discover who they are, cultivate abilities to shape their own lives, and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them" (Search Institute, 2018, para. 1) when they are able to make close connections within developmental relationships with others.

The connection students feel in their school is largely impacted by the intentionality of the adults working there. Students shared how teachers are intentional in the classroom to make sure all students are engaged and intermingling with one another. Students shared how they realize their school tries to provide diverse opportunities so all students can find their place of belonging in the school. John shared, "There's lots of opportunities here. If students are not taking advantage of them, then I can only see it as it being their own fault. A student shouldn't complain if they don't feel connected."

The subtheme of student voice emerged with connection and students shared how important is to them for the adults in their school to share important information with them and

seek their opinion when major changes are being implemented. Ashley further added, “They always do surveys before they change something or do something different. So, they see what the students like first, to make sure they're not going to step on any toes before they change something.”

As was the case in other PYD constructs, students and school staff shared about the ability of student organizations and extracurricular activities to strengthen student connection. Mary said:

> I know I always bring up clubs a lot, but I feel like clubs is a good one to point to with this one because you have places where you feel comfortable with people, the people that are in it, because you know that everyone here has the same beliefs. Just like this feeling of freedom to know that, you can say what you want and you don't have to worry about people having different viewpoints than you.

Riley said, “Like sports, they really bring people together.” Mrs. Nester shared how she feels trauma informed training focused on properly confronting behavior issues has strengthened connection in her school:

> When we became trauma informed and decided that we're not going to, you know, engage a student when they're escalated, we're going to wait till they are able to reason and talk to them in a caring way. Yes, they'll still have a consequence for whatever they're doing wrong, but more of a learning process than a punitive process.

The PYD survey supported what the students shared about how involvement in various Career Technical Student Organizations (CTSOs), student government, and other leadership opportunities, build connection in a school. Students serving in a school leadership role (n=22) had a mean connection score of 68.64 while students not serving in a school leadership role

(*n*=55) had a mean connection score of 60.82. Students involved with a CTSO (*n*=30) had a mean connection score of 67.75 while students not involved with a CTSO (*n*=47) had a mean connection score of 60.05.

Character

Student Level

As was the case with the other PYD constructs in this study, character varied between students. Mary said the following about the character of students in her school, “Some is good and some is bad.” Five sub-themes emerged from the coding for the student level of character: acceptance of others, respect for others, behavior, accountability, and connected to home life. These subthemes align with prior character research. Personal values, social conscience, values diversity, and conduct morality are all part of the character construct (Geldhof et al., 2014). Honesty, responsibility, and restraint from destructive behaviors are additional attributes of character that can be developed and nurtured in PYD environments (Search Institute, 2006).

A reoccurring subtheme with students and school staff across the mental health and PYD discussions was acceptance of others. Based on the sharing, it appears students in small, rural schools struggle to accept people who are different and considered outsiders and connect it to character. Roger spoke of the lack of acceptance for students of different races in a predominately White school, “I've heard so many instances where students of color have been like, not physically harmed for being the color that they are, but like verbally, said to their face.”

Students also linked respect for others to character. Mary said, “I mean, I'd say that, for the most part, we all respect each other's beliefs pretty well. I think a lot of us keep our beliefs to ourselves just because, you know, obviously not everyone has the same beliefs as us.” Not all

students felt like respect for others existed at their school as Arlee shared how she feels her class of students lack respect, “They don’t respect stuff, our grade doesn’t. I don’t think.”

Student behavior emerged as a character subtheme and students linked risk-taking behavior to lack of character. The most common risk-taking behaviors mentioned by students, included cheating, skipping class, cussing, vaping, and drug use. In contrast to bad character behavior, some students and adults linked accountability with others to character. Sarah said, “I see students like, helping out others, and helping them make the right choices.” Mrs. Ray shared how she believes students hold each other accountable when it comes to character, “I think our students hold each other accountable. If there is that individual or that group of individuals that is not, you know, using good character, the others will call them out.”

School Actions

When school staff and students were asked how their school works to build and develop character in students, three main sub-themes emerged: adult modeling, school focus, and character-based clubs. The adult modeling and school focus subthemes involved the adults in the school being intentional about providing students with opportunities to build character and addressing character development in SEL curriculum. These findings are supported by the character education research that indicates character education in schools can take on many forms – service learning, social emotional learning, and prevention programs all could be considered character building programs (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004). The subtheme of character-based clubs aligns with research that discovered that a student’s feeling of connectedness to the school environment has been found to enhance the impact of character education programs (Berkowitz & Bier, 2004).

Students shared how they witness the adults in their school make student character a priority. Students shared how they look to the adults in their school to model strong character. Student were also perceptive about efforts their school has made in promoting strong character. Mrs. Love said the following about her school's focus on character, "I think we keep it up front. I mean, I talk about character, all the time in my classes. And I think most staff will do that." Students also shared how certain classroom assignments that challenge students to respect the beliefs of others can build character. Students realized that the service learning requirement of their school is an effort to build character. Being intentional about character in dealing with student discipline was discussed by some adults.

Clubs and organizations were mentioned across various PYD constructs, but the specific theme of character-based clubs emerged under character. Students and school staff identified unique clubs in their school such as, an accountability group and an Athletic Christian Team, that make character their focus.

Compassion/Caring

Student Level

The construct of compassion, or caring, is about being able to show sympathy and empathy for others (Lerner, 2007). When school staff and students were asked about the level of compassion students possess at their school, three sub-themes emerged: varies with students, linked to positive behavior, and understanding and acceptance. On the PYD survey, students rated themselves the highest in Compassion/Caring, with a mean score of 76.67.

The variance in student compassion discussed was strongly related to the age, or grade of the students. Arlee added, "There really is not in the sophomore class either. You could tell someone about your problems, but they would just joke about it. The sophomore class is very

close minded towards emotional things." The PYD survey results indicated that juniors (*n*=35) had a mean compassion score of 78.48 and the sophomores (*n*=41) had a compassion score of 74.96.

The adults connected student compassion to positive behavior. Mrs. Miller shared, "We don't have a lot of behavior problems, I think because of that. This is a close-knit student population and most of them are really compassionate." Mr. Hinkle said, "Some of that is, we don't have behavior issues, or let's say fights. Because I think that the kids feel comfortable coming to somebody and letting them know what's going on, or other kids defending another kid."

Understanding and acceptance emerged as a subtheme for compassion and students shared how they see their classmates exhibit compassion. It is important to note here that even though the four schools were similar throughout most of this study, there were some differences with character and compassion. Students in two of the four schools were more vocal about the connection between lack of acceptance of others with poor character, while the students in the other two schools shared how they witness acceptance of others in their school and how this portrays compassion. Shawna said, "Compassion is really good here, I'd say. We all understand and listen." Erika added a salient point, "I think most students are going through the same thing." Mr. Legg shared, "I feel like 90% of them are in the same boat. So, they're very compassionate to each other. Mrs. Starcher touched on how she witnesses students who do not have empathy or understanding of students who have mental health issues, "I think they have good intentions. They can be sympathetic and empathetic of some things. But coming from a rural community, they are not always sympathetic or empathetic about mental health issues."

School Actions

The students and school staff shared various examples of how their school works to build and develop compassion in students. Two subthemes emerged from the coding: teacher modeling and school focus. These subthemes align with PYD research that indicates empathy and sympathy can be modeled, nurtured, and developed in youth (Lerner, 2007).

Mrs. Nester said, “I feel the teachers model compassion with each other. We are a family.” When teachers model compassion, students notice. Sarah said, “Sometimes, teachers will let you put your head down on the desk for a few minutes, to calm down. Most teachers will pull you out of class and talk to you. I feel overall, some teachers do show compassion.” Bailey said, “I guess you can say, teachers help with that, because if a teacher sees that anybody, is like picking or doing anything to anybody, they won't let that happen.”

Schools can make compassion part of their culture by making it a priority and focus. This can be accomplished through SEL curriculum delivery and classroom assignments. Mary said, “We do a lot of assignments or projects where we have to learn to work with others in a way that shows compassion. We have to respect each other's views on different subjects. I feel like they teach that really well here.”

Contribution

Student Level

Contribution is “the desire and the capacity to give back to those people and institutions that give to us” (Lerner, 2007, p. 183). Once again, school staff and students indicated that the contribution level in their school varies with students. Arlee said, “I think this one varies by student.” Students and adults mainly connected the level of student contribution to the sub-theme of volunteerism.

So much of contribution happens outside of the school in the home and community so it makes it challenging for students to identify examples of student contribution. Students did indicate that they see many students volunteer their time to help around the school and community. Erika said, “If we have like a volunteer thing at the school, if students can find a way to get there, they'll be there.” Sarah shared, “I see a lot of students that volunteer, like Student Council. They have a lot of students in there that volunteer and help.” Mr. Stone said the following about students at his school, “When our coach takes kids to the food bank, he never has a problem getting kids to go with him. He can take a busload every day.”

School Actions

Students and school staff shared several ways they believe their school builds and develops contribution in students, but they also mentioned contribution is something they see modeled in the school and community. Two sub-themes emerged from the coding of transcripts: community service/service learning projects and school and community modeling. Research indicates young people are empowered when they are a valued member in society, are viewed as important and useful resources, and are able to serve others (Search Institute, 2006).

Community service and service learning were the major examples students and adults shared about how their school promotes and develops student contribution. Chris shared, “We have community service hours that we do, you know, to give the students a chance to give back to the to the community.” Clubs and organizations also provide a means for students to contribute. Amy said, “In JROTC, we got to go to a homeless shelter to feed them.” Bailey shared, “Our agriculture teacher here, he goes to the lake and he'll have other students go to pick up and cleanup over there.”

Contribution was the only PYD construct in which students really discussed the impact of their community. Students indicated that they see contribution being modeled in their community. Carl shared the following about contribution, “I feel like this is a community thing. It goes back to law offices, doctors giving back, giving money to make all the football fields and softball fields possible.” Mr. Bliss shared how adults in his school model contribution, “And these kids give their time because they see adults like Mrs. Love. There's a lot of adults in this building that go to student games, they're visible, and they're giving of their time.”

There is more work to be done in rural communities when it comes to making students feel connected and valued in ways that inspire them to make significant contributions. Mr. Stone shared how he wishes students had more opportunities to contribute in a rural area, “The problem for us is more creating the opportunity than it is the kids participating. The opportunities to give back are not as great as they would be in a larger area.” The PYD survey results indicated that students do not necessarily feel important in their community. The two lowest scoring questions on the PYD survey were about community. The score for the question, “I feel like an important member of my local community” was 2.44 while the score for the question, “Adults in my town or city listen to what I have to say” was also 2.44.

Services, Opportunities, and Supports – Research Question Three

The third research question sought to discover what services, opportunities, and supports schools are implementing and providing to address student mental health issues and to strengthen student PYD. Some of the services, opportunities, and supports that emerged are not included in the literature review because the study set out to discover what schools were implementing and really had no pre-conceived ideas of what specific services, opportunities, and supports were being implemented.

Services

A service is an action done to or for youth intended to improve their health, safety, and overall well-being (Pittman et al., 2003). Services are critical interventions, such as providing food for hungry children or mental health services for youth, and are traditionally delivered through public welfare, health, and school programs (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007).

Food Distribution

The most common service available at all four schools in the study involved food distribution. Schools provided free and reduced breakfast and lunch, with some of the schools providing breakfast and lunch free to all students. In addition to this, most of the schools made sure students had additional food, including snacks provided by teachers and after school programs, second breakfast options, weekend backpack programs, and after school and summer school program feeding. Children in rural, low SES communities experience higher rates of food insecurity than children in non-rural areas and food insecurity has been linked to higher rates of mental health issues and lower educational attainment (Showalter et al., 2019).

Access to a Licensed Mental Health Therapist or Counselor

It was encouraging to see that all four schools in the study have made sure their students have access to a licensed therapist or counselor. In three of the four schools, a public/private partnership was created with a community or regional mental health clinic. A professional therapist or counselor visits the school weekly or biweekly to meet with students. In one school, the school district actually hired a full-time mental health counselor to work in the schools.

These licensed mental health professionals are working diligently to eliminate the stigma of mental health. Mrs. Taylor, a school-based mental health counselor shared:

> We're making leaps and bounds in the right direction. I think the next step we need to take is just to keep shedding the light on the importance of mental health, and losing the stigma associated with mental health. We need to normalize mental health.

It is encouraging to know these schools are working to increase the percentage of students receiving the treatment they need, because according to some reports, 60 percent of students do not receive the mental health treatment they need due to stigma or lack of access to services. (National Association of School Psychologists, 2021).

School-Based Social Resource

All four of the schools had an individual, hired by the school district, for the purpose of connecting students and families to necessary resources. In two schools, this individual was a social worker who met with higher need students, coordinated and taught the SEL specialized courses, and contacted parents or guardians on matters of school truancy or other issues. In one of the schools, this person was a Communities in Schools (CIS) site coordinator. In the other school, these duties were handled by the district Student Services Coordinator. This finding is confirmed by research that indicates school social workers connect students and families with important resources and services and are called upon to address various student problems such as, truancy, social withdrawal, social emotional issues, effects of poverty, substance abuse, and sexuality issues (National Association of Social Workers, 2010).

After-School Programming

Three of the four schools in the study offered some type of after-school program. The structure and purpose varied between schools, but each school did provide students with food, and in most cases, transportation home afterwards. Two of the four schools funded their after-school and summer-school programs with a 21st Century Community Learning Center (CCLC)

federal grant. Two of the three schools used their after-school time for tutoring, credit recovery, and school work make-up time. One school included youth development programming that involved character development and service learning. Research involving the impact of after-school programming indicates students benefit when they are engaged in structured activities that offer opportunities to positively interact with adults and peers, encourage contribution and initiative, and involve challenging and engaging tasks that allow them to use their strengths and learn and apply new skills (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007).

Robust Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Intervention

Two of the schools in the study provided a robust Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) intervention for students guided by the Multi-Tier System of Supports (MTSS). These two schools used a SEL curriculum with separate components designed for various levels of need. In each school, Tier 2 and Tier 3 students attended a small group SEL class with individualized course content. Tier 1 students, the entire student body, received SEL content during their advisory period. SEL interventions have been found to benefit student's mental health and PYD regardless of the student's race, socioeconomic background, or school location (Taylor et al., 2017).

Career, College, and Workforce Services

Two of the four schools in the study offered specific programs targeting needy students to provide extra support to attend college or enter the workforce. One school partnered with the state's Department of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) to offer students with disabilities, including ADHD or anxiety, services such as, job exploration, career counseling, work-based learning experiences, and postsecondary assistance. One school implemented a Jobs for America's Graduates (JAG) program designed to help youth reach economic and academic success through

project-based learning, trauma informed care, and employer engagement. This same school has The Talent Search, a federal TRIO program aimed at identifying and assisting individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds who have potential to succeed in higher education.

Opportunities

"Opportunities are the vehicles that offer youth meaningful and real ways to influence the world around them, nurture their interests and talents, practice and enhance skills and competencies, and increase connectedness to community" (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007, p. 3). Opportunities are actions by youth where they are actively engaged in interacting with others in real world scenarios and solving problems (Pittman et al., 2003). The major opportunities for strengthening student mental health and PYD that emerged from student and adult focus group interviews, observations, and document analysis included: student leadership opportunities through student clubs, organizations, and programs; co-curricular and extracurricular activities; and college, career, and workplace readiness opportunities. The findings in the study were supported by prior research in youth development that indicates, in order for the mental health and PYD of students to be strengthened, they must be given opportunities to engage in their own development (Duerden et al., 2010). Research indicates "youth who participate in any activity display more positive social, emotional, psychological, and physical outcomes" than youth who do not participate (Ettekal & Mahoney, 2017, p. 240).

Student Leadership Opportunities

In each of the four schools in this study, school staff and students expressed how important providing students with opportunities to belong and find a place of acceptance in clubs and organizations is to student mental health and PYD. In addition to just finding a place to belong, students need opportunities to lead, contribute, and work with others to solve problems.

John shared the following about the importance of student leadership opportunities, “Clubs allow you to have social interactions and get to meet people that you don't really know. There are also leadership opportunities, like getting elected President or Treasurer.” Mary said, “I think FFA is a big thing, because it gets you out into the community. It helps with leadership, speaking, and people skills.”

Students desire to have their voice heard and opinions valued and schools that nurture student voice have students who feel more connected to their school. Youth need access to opportunities in schools to develop their voice, initiative, and identity (Duerden et al., 2010). Schools in this study that encouraged and nurtured student voice instituted the following: student led parent/teacher conferences; an active and engaged student government, student surveys to seek student input, officer and committee roles in leadership clubs, organizations, and programs, and student-centered classroom teaching. Students who served in a leadership role in this study (n=22) scored an average of five and a half points higher in all six PYD constructs compared to students who did not serve in a leadership role.

The following is a compiled list of all the different leadership-based clubs, organizations, and programs offered in the four schools in this study: Accountability Group, Art Club, Athletic Christian Team (ACT), Band Club, BETA, Bible Club, Career Associations, Choir Club, DECA, Drama Club, FBLA, FCA, FCCLA, FFA, Fishing Club, French Club, Honor Flight, Interact, JROTC, Key Club, LGBT&F Club, Math Club, Native American Club, National Honor Society, National Technical Honor Society, Post-Secondary Club, Prom Committee, ProStart, Rachel’s Challenge, RAZE (Tear Down Tobacco Lies), SAAE (Students Against Destructive Decisions), SAFE (Seat Belts are for Everyone), Scholar’s Bowl, SkillsUSA, Spanish Club, Student Council, Talent Search, Thespians, Upward Bound, and Video/Audio Club.

Co-curricular and Extracurricular Activities

Co-curricular school activities provide students with opportunities to be engaged in learning new skills and finding, growing, and developing their strengths and talents. Mr. Wilson shared his desire to connect students with activities in his school, “Football and Band are two things that takes in a large number of kids. My job is to give you the resources to make your program the best it can be, because that's going to touch the lives of kids.” Some students spoke of the significant impact opportunities in their school, beyond academic achievement and course work, can have on their competence. Erika shared this about participating in Theater:

> I'm dyslexic. So, like, I don't like reading in general. But like, last year, I had like two lines, and I'm freaking out the whole time. But this year, I knew I could do that. So, once I did that, I was like, okay, I can take more. So now I'm in a pretty big part.

Co-curricular activities connect students and give them a place to belong in the school. Jan shared the following about the importance of Drama, “Drama is really a good one too. Because you have different cliques that come together in Drama.”

The following is a compiled list of all the different co-curricular activities offered in the four schools in this study: Art, Band, Choir, Debate Team, Drama, Forensics Team, Music, and Theater.

Extracurricular activities, such as sports teams, provide students with an opportunity to work with others toward a common goal, learn how to be a contributing member of a team, gain a sense of their own personal identity, and gain competence. Research suggests that youth engaged in voluntary structured activities, including sports and recreation, are more likely to develop a sense of identity compared to less involved youth (Duerden et al., 2010). Mark shared the following about his involvement in sports:

> I think it builds character too. I mean, we're not always going to win games. It just teaches you how to face adversity and overcome that. I'm trying to get myself in habits now that I can apply later on in life, like being at practice every day, being at school every day.

Amy said "I believe our sports make a difference because a lot of kids stay out of trouble and keep themselves on track." Mr. Legg, teacher and athletic director, shared, "We have 362 kids, and we have 211 athletes, two thirds play something." Students in the study who participated in at least one sport (*n*=52) had a PYD competence score of 61.41 compared to students who did not play sports (*n*=25) who had a competence score of 55.87.

The following is a compiled list of all the different extracurricular activities offered in the four schools in this study: Baseball, Boys' and Girls' Basketball, Cheerleading, Cross Country, Football, Golf, Soccer, Softball, Swimming, Tennis, Track & Field, Volleyball, and Wrestling.

College, Career, and Workplace Readiness Activities

The school staff and the students in all four schools expressed how important it is for their school to offer college, career, and workplace readiness opportunities for students which is supported by research that indicates, schools must be a place where students have the opportunity to build career, workforce, and life skills (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002). Research shows that CTE participation increases the probability of graduating on-time by 7 to 10 percent for affluent students, and significantly higher for low SES students (Dougherty, 2018). Not only does research indicate students who participate in CTE have higher earnings after high school than non-CTE students (Meer, 2007; Page, 2012), but it also suggests students enrolled in CTE benefit psychologically with increased feelings of self-worth and a strengthening of their self-efficacy (Kelly & Price, 2009).

Students in this study who were enrolled in at least one CTE program (*n*=61) had a mean depression score of 22.01. Students who were not enrolled in a CTE program (*n*=13) had a mean depression score of 29.38 with the higher score indicating more depressive symptoms. Students in this study enrolled in at least one CTE program (*n*=64) scored higher in PYD confidence (62.28) and connection (64.14) when compared to students not enrolled in a CTE program (*n*=13) who had a confidence score of (54.87) and a connection score of (57.69).

The following is a compiled list of all the different career technical education (CTE) programs offered at the four schools in this study: Agriculture, Business, Carpentry, Education and Training, Family and Consumer Sciences, Finance, Health Sciences, Hospitality and Tourism, Information Technology, Integrated Production Technology, JROTC, Manufacturing, Marketing, Pet Grooming, Power Plant Technology, Project-Based Learning (PBL), ProStart Restaurant Management, and Welding Technology. Mr. Legg, CTE teacher, said, "I think our CTE community, which entails JROTC, is valuable to this school. We have 86% of our students here in a CTE program. We are double what the county is."

Dual credit college classes were offered at all four schools in the form of articulated college credit, college classes at the Community Technical College, or Advanced Placement (AP) courses. According to Mr. Hinkle, the school principal at one school in the study, his school encourages all students to take college classes so they can get a taste of what it is like and hopefully not be intimidated in the future to take more college courses.

Students at all four of the schools were also able to attend classes in-person at nearby Community and Technical Colleges or District Career Centers to take CTE programs not offered at their school, like Welding and Building Construction. Andrew shared, "I think a lot of kids enjoy that they can take a bus up to the CTE Center and do those things that we don't have here."

Specific workforce readiness activities, such as On the Job Training, internships, and apprenticeships were offered at two schools to provide students with real-world work experiences.

Supports

"Supports are the ongoing positive relationships that young people have with adults, peers, and organizations that provide safety, structure, motivation, nurturing, and guidance to all youth to explore, test, learn, grow, and contribute" (Office of Safe and Drug-Free Schools, 2007, p. 3). Supports can also be activities done with youth to facilitate access to interpersonal relationships and resources (Pittman et al., 2003).

Academic Supports

In an effort to relieve some of the pressure students feel about their school work and grades, two schools in the study implemented several interventions aimed at supporting students academically. These supports include both times set aside during the school day and after school, for tutoring and catching up on school work. During both times, teachers are available to meet with students and provide assistance.

These two schools also provide extra support to students who have failed courses and are behind on graduation credits. The schools offers credit recovery opportunities as well as a Department of Education program that allows students who have fallen behind their graduation cohort due to failing major core courses and are unable to graduate on time, a chance to take a CTE program and a High School Equivalency Test and graduate on time with their cohort.

Teachers

The overwhelming support theme that emerged was the role of a caring teacher. The words, actions, and example of a teacher still has the potential to change the life of a student.

During focus group interviews with students, they shared specific examples of how teachers show support for their mental health. Riley shared, “One of my teachers is now having mental health days in her class, where you can't do homework, you can't do any assignments. Just to take a break from the stress of schoolwork.” In addition to these type of classroom practices, students also indicated that supportive teachers notice when students are struggling mentally. Mary said, “I've personally seen teachers notice kids are not acting the way they usually do and pull them aside and have a conversation with them. And try to get them out of the funk and see what's wrong with them.” Research has found that students engaged in caring relationships with teachers are more academically successful and exhibit stronger pro-social behavior, especially students with challenging home lives (Zakrzewski, 2012).

School Counselors

With so many schools adding additional services and supports in the form of additional staffing, including mental health therapist and social workers, one may overlook the importance of the role of school counselor in strengthening student mental health. School counselors still serve a very critical role in the school, and the students recognized their importance. Based on student and school staff sharing, supportive counselors still provide career and academic counseling, but they also talk with students and listen to their concerns, and connect them will additional mental health supports if necessary.

Sarah said, “I will tell you this, Mrs. Nester, our counselor here, she really cares. She's the one that got me into therapy. She’s someone that actually cares about how the students are. She's helped a lot of kids get therapy.” Kasey said, “I think our counselor is pretty awesome. I think there's not one person in the school that does not like her. You can go in there anytime and talk to her. And sometimes she'll set up meetings just to see if you're doing okay.” Mrs. Marty,

had this to say about the school counselors, “I would say, district wide, we have really good counselors. And I think they are good in every building in terms of building this relationship with kids and advocating for them.” The power of a caring school counselor is supported by research that indicates students who have greater access to school counselors and counseling programs are more likely to succeed academically and behaviorally, especially students in low SES schools (Lapan et al., 2012).

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

This was an interesting support intervention that emerged from the study as one does not typically connect an approach to discipline to student mental health or PYD. Every school in the study had some form of PBIS approach to school discipline. The PBIS approach to discipline focuses on prevention and not punishment. The goal of PBIS is to make schools more effective in providing equitable and safe learning environments for all students and to reduce exclusionary discipline such as, office discipline referrals, suspensions, and restrain and seclusion. The PBIS approach is strongly connected to trauma-informed care. Data collected from trauma informed schools indicates significant decreases in suspensions, expulsions, and discipline referrals (Walkley & Cox, 2013). Every principal in the study indicated that their discipline referrals have decreased since implementing this different approach to handling student discipline. Mr. Hinkle shared there were only 344 discipline referrals for the entire school year, with 266 of those being attendance. He indicated that the school only had 13 behavioral referrals the entire year.

Trauma Informed Care (TIC)

Although not every school indicated their staff had been trained, TIC did emerge as a type of support based on analyzing school documentations and seeing the connection it has with other supports that were mentioned. TIC is about recognizing and responding to signs and

symptoms of trauma to better support students who have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Examples of ACEs include: experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect; witnessing violence in the home or community; having a family member attempt or die by suicide; substance use problems in the home, mental health problems in the home, and instability in the home (CDC, 2021).

Implications for Practice

Student Mental Health

This research study revealed that most students feel pressure and that school work and grades serve as a major source of pressure. The following are some school-based recommendations for practice, based on the findings of this research, for addressing and assisting with student **pressure**:

- Shift the school priority away from grades and test scores. Make educating the whole child the priority; cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and spiritual.
- Develop a new grading system for schools. Replace letter grades and grade point averages with a knowledge and skill content standards mastery approach.
- Discuss this pressure with students and ask them how to assist with decreasing it.
- Work with students to seek a balance between maintaining high expectations and providing enough space and time to meet them.
- Provide students with brain breaks and time to disengage from school work in classrooms.
- Exhibit empathy to students who may need extra time on assignments because of mental health struggles.
- Eliminate or limit homework assignments.

- Provide time during the school day and after school for academic support, including time for credit recovery, tutoring, and making up school work.

Student home life emerged as a very strong theme in both student and adults focus groups. Many students attending rural, low SES schools have traumatic home lives. The following are some recommendations for schools and school staff for addressing and assisting with the factor of **home life**:

- Add a social resource staff member to the school to make stronger connections with families.
- Develop strategies to support grandparents raising children.
- Train all staff to be Trauma Informed.
- Provide students with opportunities to be engaged with supportive and caring adults and peers in after-school and summer school programs.

Technology, including social media, electronic communication, and school-based technology, are all adding to the pressure students feel and giving many of them anxiety and depression. The following are some recommendations for schools and school staff for addressing assisting with the factor of **technology**:

- Give students a break from technology – do not put everything online.
- Assign classroom projects and assignments that do not require the use of a computer or other screened device.
- Assign classroom projects and assignments that promote team work and social interaction among students.
- Focus on social competence in and provide SEL learning in this area to all students.

Bullying was a factor that emerged only from student transcripts. Much improvement has been made in schools in addressing bullying, but there is work that still needs done. The following are some recommendations for schools and school staff for addressing assisting with the factor of **bullying**:

- Continue effort to address all types of bullying.
- Listen to what students say about bullying.
- Add social media etiquette and compassion to SEL curriculum.
- Address the importance of accepting others who are different and developing empathy.
- Continue faculty professional development concerning bullying.

Mental health stigma emerged as a serious factor in student mental health. When stigma exists in the home, community, and school, many students keep their hurts and struggles to themselves leading to more intense mental health problems. The following are some recommendations for schools and school staff for addressing assisting with the factor of mental health **stigma**:

- Work with mental health counselors, along with social workers, to normalize mental health in the school and community.
- Advertise school-based mental health services in the school and community.
- Help students understand their mental health and the mental health of others.
- Provide targeted mental health professional development for school staff.
- Talk about mental health in classrooms.

The following are some general student mental health recommendations based on the findings in this study:

- Either through a public/private partnership or a school district position, make sure students have access to a licensed mental health therapist or counselor.
- Make sure mental health counseling is available and advertised to all students, not just students with more serious needs. As the study revealed, most students are struggling with something and would benefit from talking with someone.
- Schools need to utilize valid assessments to confidentially and anonymously survey the mental health of students and then use the data to make decisions on specific services, opportunities, and supports.
- Schools need to revamp and ramp up their advisory periods to include meaningful SEL content for all students. Some of the schools in the study admitted to letting their advisory period SEL learning slip in the past year.
- It is imperative that every student has at least one caring adult in the school they trust and feel connected with, whether that is a teacher, coach, administrator, counselor, or mental health specialist.
- Schools need to implement a trauma informed care approach to school discipline. All schools in the study have had discipline referrals drastically decrease through this approach.
- Adults need to make sure all student mental health struggles are kept confidentially to build and maintain student trust.
- Teachers need to maintain a student-centered classroom as opposed to a teacher-centered classroom so students feel some autonomy and can take initiative.
- Remember, students need constant affirmation and encouragement.
- Adults need to constantly check in with students and ask “How are you doing today?”

- Implement place-based pedagogy strategies in classrooms and allow the lived experiences of students to be discussed and valued.
- Provide students with extra time to complete assignments when necessary.
- Allow students to go speak with counselors and mental health therapist when needed.

When coding the student and adult transcripts, I also organized all of the comments expressing a lack understanding and concern for student mental health together. It is important to note that most of the students felt like the adults in their school understood and cared about their mental health. The following is a summarized list from the transcript coding of ways students perceive some adults in their school lack understanding and concern for their mental health:

- Teachers who value the work in their class over student mental health concerns.
- Teachers who do not allow students to go talk with a counselor when they ask.
- Teachers who confront students aggressively and trigger emotions.
- When adults do not address acts of bullying.
- The school making grades and test scores a priority over student needs.
- When adults compare the challenges of today's youth to when they were young.
- When students share something personal with an adult and then that adult breaks confidence.
- When teachers do not treat students like young adults.
- When teachers do not take social-emotional learning serious during Advisory period.
- When the adults in the school do not make all students aware of mental health services and supports.

Positive Youth Development (PYD)

The overwhelming implication for practice that emerged from this study is the power of the words, actions, and example of adults that work in schools. Students were not shy to share which teachers, principals, counselors, coaches, and support staff cared the most about students and they had to refrain several times from naming adults they feel do not care or model positive behaviors.

Schools and school staff must be intentional in every decision they make when it comes to connecting students with opportunities in which they will find, grow, and nurture their strengths and talents. Adults must work with all youth in schools to discover and develop their assets and not focus on their deficits. School leaders in this study shared how they are working diligently to add as many school-based opportunities as they can so 100% of their students can connect with caring adults and peers, find a place in the school to connect and feel accepted, and develop confidence and competence.

All students need opportunities to serve in leadership positions; officer, committee chair, or committee member. Students in this study serving in a leadership role, scored higher in all PYD constructs compared to students not serving in a leadership role. All students need opportunities to connect with community activities. Students active in at least one community activity scored higher in all PYD constructs compared to students who did not participate in community activities.

Rural schools must work to help students become more accepting of people who are different than they are. Schools must increase or begin inclusion and diversity efforts. Rural students need to be exposed to students from different backgrounds, different races, and different belief systems. Students in the study struggled to accept outsiders and people who were different.

Students who transferred into the rural schools in this study or considered themselves different, found it challenging to connect with students in their school.

Classes that provide hands-on learning are critical to the competence, confidence, and connections of students. Career and Technical Education (CTE) emerged from the study as playing an important role in rural schools in connecting students to their future career, building confidence and competence, enhancing a feeling of belongingness, and providing an engaging environment for students to learn by doing. Schools should provide a diverse offering of CTE programs so students can find their passion, gain new skills, and have an opportunity to make higher wages in their future career.

Recommendations for Future Research

As an exploratory study, this research uncovered numerous future research opportunities. The amount of and type of professional development teachers are receiving on student mental health and PYD, and their attitudes toward it would be an interesting future study. Each of the mental health factors: pressure, home life, technology, bullying, and stigma could serve as topics for stand-alone research studies. Research studies could also take each PYD construct and investigate them further with students. The following are specific ideas for future research studies that emerged while sorting and organizing data:

- **The impact of academic labels on student mental health and PYD** – In one of the schools in this study, there was a lot of discussion from students about their dislike for having "Honors" courses. They shared that this has created almost an academic caste system in their school, where students are labeled by everyone, including teachers, as smart, average, or dumb.

- **The impact of lack of diversity in rural schools** – The lack of diversity was felt strongly by students in three of the four schools in this study. Although it did not emerge across the study, it was obvious that students of another race, besides White; different gender identity than male and female; and a different sexual orientation than heterosexual, were not accepted well in a rural school and struggled mentally and with their PYD.
- **The impact of lack of sleep on student mental health** – Several students mentioned they do not get enough sleep, but this really never emerged as a stand-alone theme.
- **The impact of SEL interventions on academic performance** – In a discussion with one of the school staff at one school in the study, she shared that her school district hopes that all of their investment in SEL efforts will also improve student academic performance.
- **Student mobility and mental health and PYD** –At least one of the schools in this study had a high level of student mobility and it was revealed in this school that students who transfer into small, rural schools typically experience bullying and social isolation.
- **Lack of highly qualified teachers in rural, low SES schools** – Students in one school in the study shared how they have a high turnover of teachers and that several are not qualified to teach the subject they are teaching.
- **The impact of the school principal in implementing mental health and PYD initiatives** – Each of the school principals in this study were passionate about the efforts their school is making with mental health and PYD. Several students even

commented on the strong leadership in their schools. What would the outcomes be if the school principal lacked enthusiasm or interest for these initiatives?

- **The impact of student maturity on mental health and PYD** – The grade level of students emerged frequently in this study with younger students being described as lacking PYD and joking about mental health.
- **The struggles of ninth graders – What practices improve their high school transition?** – Several students and school staff in the study referred to the behavior and attitudes of ninth graders in their school. One of the four schools had a ninth grade academy where ninth grade students were kept separate from the rest of the student body.
- **The impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on student mental health and PYD** – As was discussed in this study, this was not a COVID-19 study. However, students and adults did discuss how the pandemic did magnify existing student mental health problems.
- **The difference of mental health and PYD between male, female, and non-binary students** – This study revealed many differences between gender. A more in-depth study breaking down the feelings, outlook, and attitudes of each gender group could reveal even more.
- **Mental health and PYD in earlier grades** – This study was focused on the mental health and PYD of students attending high school. Additional research should be conducted to explore the mental health and PYD of students in elementary and middle grades.

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Appendix A - School District Support Letter Template

School System/District Name and
Address

Date

Mr. Jason Hughes and Dr. Jon Ulmer
Kansas State University
317 Umberger Hall
1612 Claflin Road
Manhattan, KS 66506-3402

Dear Jason and Dr. Ulmer,

Thank you for sharing the information about your research study. The (Name of School System/District) is committed to the well-being of all our students and therefore would be interested in the results and potential impacts of your research.

The (Name of School System/District) officially approves of your research study, "Examining the Relationship Between Student Mental Health and Positive Youth Development Opportunities and Supports in Rural, Low SES Schools", and we look forward to working with you in conducting your research.

Sincerely,

Signature
Name and Title

Appendix B - Human Subjects IRB Approval

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | University Research Compliance Office

TO: Dr. Jonathan Ulmer
Communications and Agricultural Education
Umberger Hall

Proposal Number: 10311

FROM: Rick Scheidt, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 12/10/2020

RE: Approval of Proposal Entitled, "Examining the Relationship Between Student Mental Health and Positive Youth Development Opportunities and Supports in Rural, Low SES Schools."

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects has reviewed your proposal and has granted full approval. This proposal is **approved for three years from the date of this correspondence.**

APPROVAL DATE: 12/10/2020

EXPIRATION DATE: 12/09/2023

In giving its approval, the Committee has determined that:

☒ There is no more than minimal risk to the subjects.
☐ There is greater than minimal risk to the subjects.

This approval applies only to the proposal currently on file as written. Any change or modification affecting human subjects must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation. All approved proposals are subject to continuing review, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Announced post-approval monitoring may be performed during the course of this approval period by URCO staff. Injuries, unanticipated problems or adverse events involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the IRB and / or the URCO.

Appendix C - School Principal Initial Correspondence

Dear (Principal Name),

Thank you for your approval of me conducting my dissertation research, “Examining the Relationship Between Student Mental Health and the Positive Youth Development Services, Opportunities, and Supports in Rural, Low SES Schools” at (High School Name). I have received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval for the research and would now, with your continued support and direction, like to conduct the first phase of the research. The first phase involves having Sophomore and Junior students take an online survey measuring mental health and Positive Youth Development constructs. Based on the data from this survey, the school may or may not be selected for the second phase of the study, which involves a case study methodology with student and administrative interviews and school observations. If selected, the second phase would not take place until late March or April.

The next steps involve obtaining parent/guardian consent, student assent, ascertaining the best timing and methods for the student survey to be administered, and administering the survey to students. In order to provide adequate time to analyze the data from the surveys, select schools for phase 2, and conduct the second phase of the study, my goal is to survey students sometime in between now and March 12.

I realize you may have additional questions and that my timeline may need adjusted to your school schedule; therefore, I am hoping we can connect sometime this week during a day and time that works best for you on a Zoom call to discuss these next steps. When possible, please email me back with a day and time that works with your schedule.

Sincerely,

Jason Hughes
Kansas State University
Graduate Teaching Assistant - Agricultural Education

Appendix D - Student Consent/Assent Form for Survey

Parental Informed Consent and Student Assent Form

You are being asked to allow your child to participate in a research project. This form provides you with information about the project. Please read the information and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to allow your child to participate

PROJECT TITLE: *Examining the Relationship Between Student Mental Health and Positive Youth Development Services, Opportunities, and Supports in Rural, Low SES Schools*

PROJECT APPROVAL DATE/ EXPIRATION DATE:
Approval: 12/12/20
Expiration: 12/09/23

LENGTH OF STUDY: 45 minutes

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR/CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Dr. Jonathan Ulmer

CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:

Dr. Jonathan Ulmer, 785-532-1250, julmer@ksu.edu

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION*: For any questions or to discuss any aspect of the research with an official of the university or the IRB contact:*
Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224
Cheryl Doerr, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH: The purpose of this study is to explore the current mental health and confidence, competence, connection, character, caring, and contribution of students and to identify activities, programs, and supports that strengthen the mental health and positive youth development of students attending your child's school.

If you agree to allow your child to participate in this research project, we will ask your child to do the following:

Students will complete an online survey during school hours and on a day and time agreed upon with the school administration. One part of the survey will include a list of ways your child might have felt or behaved in the past week and they will be asked to mark how often in the past week they behaved or felt that way. A second part will include questions asked to determine the level of confidence, competence, connection, character, caring, and contribution your child possesses.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED: There are no known risks to your child in completing this survey. Since many of the questions are personal in nature, some students may experience certain levels of discomfort. Your child will not have to answer any questions they are not comfortable answering and can decide to stop completing the survey at any time without any negative consequences.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED: While there are not direct benefits for your child's participation, the results of the study will help to inform your child's school of the current status of the mental health and positive youth development of students and the best practices in programming and support for strengthening student mental health and positive youth development.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY: The survey will not include student names or any personal or identifying information. The records of this study will be kept private and on password protected computers. For any sort of report we may publish, we will not include any information making it possible to identify a participant or school. The information collected as part of this research will not be shared with any other investigators and will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

PARENTAL APPROVAL FOR MINORS:

_____

Child's Name (please print)

_____

PARENT/GUARDIAN APPROVAL SIGNATURE **Date**

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

_____

PARTICIPANT NAME/SIGNATURE **Date**

_____

WITNESS TO SIGNATURE **Date**

Appendix E - Draft Student Informed Consent/Assent Cover Letter

Dear Parent/Guardian:

Your son or daughter has been invited to participate in a research study focusing on the positive youth development services, opportunities, and supports in rural schools that impact student mental health. Our school is collaborating with Jason Hughes, a current doctorate student at Kansas State University, and former high school teacher and State FFA Advisor in West Virginia in this research.

The consent form provides additional details about the study, but if you decide to give your consent to your child's participation in the study, they will complete an anonymous web-based survey during their advisory/advisee period at school. The survey should take not more than 45 minutes. The survey will not collect any identifiable information and no one will be able to connect your child's responses to them.

While there are no direct benefits for your child's participation, the results of the study will help inform your child's school of the current status of the mental health and positive youth development of students and the best practices in programming and support for strengthening student mental health and positive youth development.

If you are willing to provide consent for your child's participation in this study, please sign the Parental Informed Consent and Student Assent Form and return it to your child's school.

Sincerely,

Appendix F - IRB Modification Approval for Focus Groups

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY | University Research Compliance Office

TO: Dr. Jonathan Ulmer
Communications and Agricultural Education
Umberger Hall

FROM: Rick Scheidt, Chair
Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects

DATE: 03/18/2021

RE: Proposal #10311.1, entitled "Examining the Relationship Between Student Mental Health and Positive Youth Development Opportunities and Supports in Rural, Low SES Schools."

MODIFICATION OF IRB PROTOCOL #10311, ENTITLED, "Examining the Relationship Between Student Mental Health and Positive Youth Development Opportunities and Supports in Rural, Low SES Schools"

EXPIRATION DATE: 12/09/2023

The Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (IRB) has reviewed and approved the request identified above as a modification of a previously approved protocol. **Please note that the original expiration remains the same.**

All approved IRB protocols are subject to continuing review at least annually, which may include the examination of records connected with the project. Announced in-progress reviews may also be performed during the course of this approval period by a member of the University Research Compliance Office staff. Unanticipated adverse events involving risk to subjects or to others must be reported immediately to the Chair of the IRB, and / or the URCO

It is important that your human subjects activity is consistent with submissions to funding / contract entities. It is your responsibility to initiate notification procedures to any funding / contract entity of any changes in your activity that affects the use of human subjects.

Appendix G - School Case Study Selection Correspondence

Dear (Principal Name)

First of all, thank you so much for working with me to administer the survey to your students for the first stage of our study. I am still working on compiling the results and waiting for a few more schools to complete the survey. I do feel I have enough information based on our earlier conversations, correspondence, and preliminary results of the student surveys to select (Name of School) as one of our two schools in (Name of State) for the case study portion of the study.

The second phase of the study is qualitative in nature and with your approval, will involve student and administration focus group interviews, observations, and document and data analysis. This phase is truly the most important as we want to hear what students say is working at their school to improve their mental health and strengthen their youth development in the areas of confidence, competence, character, compassion, connection, and contribution. Based on lessons learned from the survey phase of the research, we are prepared to give students who return consent/assent forms and participate in focus group interviews a $10.00 Amazon gift card.

I would love to discuss the second phase of the study more in depth and answer any of your questions. I do realize your Spring Break is next week, so perhaps we can set up a Zoom call for the week you return to discuss dates for school visits, protocols we need to follow, and student selection for the focus groups.

It would be helpful if you could just drop me an email today or tomorrow indicating your interest in continuing to the next phase of the research and a possible good day to set up a Zoom call for the week of March 29.

Thank you again,

Jason

Kansas State University
Graduate Teaching Assistant - Agricultural Education

Appendix H - Focus Group Selection Process Correspondence

Dear (Principal Name),

Thank you once again for working with me on this very important research. I have attached the consent form to send home to parents for students to participate in focus group interviews and the consent form for adults to complete for focus group interviews. I trust you will send consent forms home at the appropriate time before the interviews, perhaps 10-12 days before the scheduled interview. The following are the details we discussed about my upcoming school visit:

Date: Wednesday **April 21** (All Day)

Informed Consent Forms: Students who return signed consent forms and participate in the focus group interviews will receive a **$10.00 Amazon gift card.** Hopefully this incentive will help you get informed consent forms back more in a timelier manner.

Student Focus Group Interviews: We need a good mix of male and female students in each. Perhaps recruit a few extra in case some are absent on day of visit.

Student focus groups should take 90 minutes each for a total of 180 minutes. I will ask you to schedule these for a time during the day that works best for you and the students.

Group 1 (5-7 Students Total)	Group 2 (5-7 Students Total)
• *Students with various levels of school involvement who have benefitted from extra mental health and youth development support and services at the school.*	• 2-3 students involved in Extracurricular Activities (Sports and clubs) • 2-3 students involved in Co-Curricular Activities (CTE/AgEd, STEM, Band, Choir, etc. • 2-3 students not involved with school activities

Adult Focus Group Interview: The adult focus group should take 90 minutes. I will ask you to schedule this focus group for a time during the day that works best for you and the others. I am even willing to stay after school if necessary.

(5-7 Adults Total)

School Principal
Vice Principal
Social Worker
Counselor(s)/Mental Health Therapist
Coach/Club Advisor

Observations and Documentation Collection: Focus group interviewing will take up to 4 ½ hours during the day. For the remaining 3 hours of the school day I hope to make observations in the hallways, cafeteria, advisory/advisee classroom, meetings, etc. I also hope to collect any pertinent documents that will add more detail to the research. Examples of documents may include advertisements for school services and supports, social emotional health curriculum, parent/student newsletters, school-based websites, mental health online portal, etc.

Please, if you have any questions or concerns in the meantime, feel free to contact me. I will touch base with you about two weeks out from our scheduled visit.

Have a wonderful weekend!

Jason

Kansas State University
Graduate Teaching Assistant
Agricultural Education

Appendix I - Informed Consent/Assent for Student Focus Group

Parental Informed Consent and Student Assent Form

You are being asked to allow your child to participate in a research project. This form provides you with information about the project. Please read the information and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to allow your child to participate.

PROJECT TITLE: *Examining the Relationship Between Student Mental Health and Positive Youth Development Opportunities and Support in Rural, Low SES Schools*

PROJECT APPROVAL DATE/ EXPIRATION DATE: 12/10/20 to 12/09/23

LENGTH OF STUDY: Potentially up to two different days and an average of 90 minutes each day

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR/CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Dr. Jonathan Ulmer

CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:

Dr. Jonathan Ulmer, 785-532-1250, julmer@ksu.edu

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION*:* *For any questions or to discuss any aspect of the research with an official of the university or the IRB contact:*
Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224
Cheryl Doerr, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH: The purpose of this study is to investigate the current mental health and confidence, competence, connection, character, caring, and contribution of students and to identify activities, opportunities, programs, and supports in schools that strengthen the mental health and positive youth development of students attending your child's school.

If you agree to allow your child to participate in this research project, we will ask your child to do the following:

Students will participate in focus group interviews with approximately 5-6 total students. Students will be asked questions about how their school supports and strengthens their mental health, confidence, competence, connection, character, caring, and contribution and what services, opportunities, and supports have the greatest impact. A second interview may be needed to collect more information. By giving consent on this form, you are consenting to allow your child to participate in up to two, 90-minute interviews on two different school days. Information during the focus group interviews will be collected by taking notes and through audio recording. The notes and audio recordings will only be accessible to the two researchers for data analysis purposes.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED: There are no known risks to your child in participating in these focus group interviews. Since questions will be asked of all of the students in the focus group, some students may feel uncomfortable answering questions out loud and in front of others. Due to the nature of the topic of mental health, there is a possibility some student answers could be personal in nature. Your child will not have to answer any questions they are not comfortable answering and can decide to stop participating in the focus group interviews at any time without any negative consequences.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED: Each student who returns the signed consent/assent form and participates in the focus group interviews will be provided a $10 cash award. The results of the study will help to inform your child's school of the current status of the mental health and positive youth development of students and the best practices in programming and support for strengthening student mental health and positive youth development.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY: Information obtained during the focus group interviews will be written in note form and audio recorded so the researcher doesn't miss important critical information. All notes and audio recordings will be kept secure and in a locked desk drawer or password protected computer and destroyed after the research is completed. The interviewer will learn the names of the students, but real names will not be used in any research publications. For any sort of report published, we will not include any information making it possible to identify a participant or school. The information collected as part of this research will not be shared with any other investigators and will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

PARENTAL APPROVAL FOR MINORS:

_____

Child's Name (Please Print)

_____

PARENT/GUARDIAN APPROVAL SIGNATURE **Date**

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

_____

PARTICIPANT NAME/SIGNAUTRE **Date**

_____

WITNESS TO SIGNATURE **Date**

Appendix J - Informed Consent for Adult Focus Group

Informed Consent Form

PROJECT TITLE: *Examining the Relationship Between Student Mental Health and Positive Youth Development Opportunities and Support in Rural, Low SES Schools*

PROJECT APPROVAL DATE/ EXPIRATION DATE: 12/10/20 to 12/09/23

LENGTH OF STUDY: Potentially up to two different days and an average of two hours each day

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR/CO-INVESTIGATOR(S): Dr. Jonathan Ulmer

CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:

Dr. Jonathan Ulmer, 785-532-1250, julmer@ksu.edu

IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION: *For any questions or to discuss any aspect of the research with an official of the university or the IRB contact:*
Rick Scheidt, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224
Cheryl Doerr, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH: The purpose of this study is to investigate the current mental health and confidence, competence, connection, character, caring, and contribution of students and to identify activities, programs, and supports in your school that strengthens the mental health and positive youth development of students attending your school.

PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:

School administrators, counselors, and social support staff will participate in focus group interviews. You will be asked questions about how you feel your school supports and strengthens student mental health, confidence, competence, connection, character, caring, and contribution and what services, opportunities, and supports your school has that makes the greatest impact. A second interview on a different day may be needed to collect more information. By giving consent on this form, you are consenting to participate in up to two, two-hour interviews on two different school days. Information during the focus group interviews will be collected by taking notes and through audio recording. The notes and audio recordings will only be accessible to the two researchers for data analysis purposes.

RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS ANTICIPATED: There are no known risks to you for participating in focus group interviews.

BENEFITS ANTICIPATED: While there are not direct benefits for your participation, the results of the study will help to inform you of the current status of the mental health and positive youth development of your students and the best practices in programming and support for strengthening student mental health and positive youth development.

EXTENT OF CONFIDENTIALITY: Information obtained during the focus group interviews will be written in note form and audio recorded so the researcher doesn't miss important critical information. All notes and audio recordings will be kept secure and in a locked desk drawer or password protected computer and destroyed after the research is complete. The interviewer will learn the names of the participants, but real names of participants or schools will not be used in any research publications. The information collected as part of this research will not be shared with any other investigators and will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

Terms of participation: I understand this project is research, and that my participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time, and stop participating at any time without explanation, penalty, or loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understand this consent form, and willingly agree to participate in this study under the terms described, and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form.

_____

PARTICIPANT NAME/SIGNAUTRE **Date**

_____

WITNESS TO SIGNATURE **Date**

Appendix K - Initial Depression/PYD Student Survey

Positive Youth Development

Positive Youth Development Student Survey

Instructions:

Use your computer mouse to click on the appropriate answer to each question. Be as open and honest as possible for each question. This survey is completely anonymous and no one will know how you answered the questions. We hope you will answer each question, but please know you do not have to answer questions you do not want to answer.

Click on the arrow to begin taking the survey.

Below is a list of the ways you might have felt or behaved.

Please tell me how often you have felt this way during the past week.

Q1 I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me.

- ○ Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)
- ○ Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
- ○ Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
- ○ Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

Q2 I did not feel like eating; my appetite was poor.

- ○ Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)
- ○ Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
- ○ Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
- ○ Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

Q3 I felt that I could not shake off the blues even with help from my family or friends.

- ○ Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)
- ○ Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
- ○ Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
- ○ Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

Q4 I felt I was just as good as other people.

- ○ Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)
- ○ Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
- ○ Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
- ○ Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

Q5 I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing.

- ○ Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)
- ○ Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
- ○ Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
- ○ Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

Q6 I felt depressed.

- ○ Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)
- ○ Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
- ○ Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
- ○ Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

Q7 I felt that everything I did was an effort.

- ○ Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)
- ○ Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
- ○ Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
- ○ Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

Q8 I felt hopeful about the future.

- ○ Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)
- ○ Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
- ○ Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
- ○ Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

Q9 I thought my life was a failure.

- ○ Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)
- ○ Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
- ○ Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
- ○ Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

Q10 I felt fearful.

- ○ Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)
- ○ Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
- ○ Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
- ○ Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

Q11 My sleep was restless.

- ○ Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)
- ○ Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
- ○ Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
- ○ Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

Q12 I was happy.

- ○ Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)
- ○ Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
- ○ Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
- ○ Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

Q13 I talked less than usual.

- ○ Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)
- ○ Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
- ○ Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
- ○ Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

Q14 I felt lonely.

- ○ Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)
- ○ Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
- ○ Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
- ○ Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

Q15 I felt like people were unfriendly.

- ○ Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)
- ○ Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
- ○ Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
- ○ Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

Q16 I enjoyed life.

- ○ Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)
- ○ Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
- ○ Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
- ○ Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

Q17 I had crying spells.

- ○ Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)
- ○ Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
- ○ Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
- ○ Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

Q18 I felt sad.

- ○ Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)
- ○ Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
- ○ Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
- ○ Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

Q19 I felt that people dislike me.

- ○ Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)
- ○ Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
- ○ Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
- ○ Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

Q20 I could not get "going".

- ○ Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day)
- ○ Some or a little of the time (1-2 days)
- ○ Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days)
- ○ Most or all of the time (5-7 days)

Below are some statements that may or may not describe you.

How much are the following statements like you?

Q21 I have a lot of friends.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q22 I do very well in my classwork at school.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q23 I am better than others my age at sports.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q24 I am happy with myself most of the time.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q25 I hardly ever do things I know I shouldn't do.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q26 I really like the way I look.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q27 All in all, I am glad I am me.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q28 I want to make the world a better place to live.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q29 I accept responsibility for my actions when I make a mistake or get in trouble.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q30 I enjoy being with people of a different race or ethnicity.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q31 When I see someone being taken advantage of, I want to help them.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q32 When I see someone being picked on, I feel sorry for them.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q33 When I see another person who is hurt or upset, I feel sorry for them.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q34 I receive a lot of encouragement at my school.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q35 I am a useful and important member of my family.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q36 I feel like an important member of my local community.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q37 I feel my friends are good friends.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q38 I am just as smart as others my age.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q39 I could do well at just about any new physical or athletic activity.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q40 I am popular with others my age.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q41 I am good looking.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q42 I usually act the way I am supposed to.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q43 I am happy the way I am.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q44 When I am an adult I will have a good life.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q45 I give time and money to make life better for other people.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q46 I do what I believe is right, even if my friends make fun of me.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q47 I know a lot about people of other races and ethnicities.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q48 It bothers me when bad things happen to any person.

- Not at all like me
- A little like me
- Kind of like me
- A lot like me
- Just like me

Q49 I feel sorry for other people who don't have what I have.

- Not at all like me
- A little like me
- Kind of like me
- A lot like me
- Just like me

Q50 It makes me sad to see a person who doesn't have friends.

- Not at all like me
- A little like me
- Kind of like me
- A lot like me
- Just like me

Q51 Teachers at school push me to be the best I can be.

- Not at all like me
- A little like me
- Kind of like me
- A lot like me
- Just like me

Q52 I have lots of good conversations with my parents.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q53 Adults in my town or city listen to what I have to say.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

Q54 My friends care about me.

- ○ Not at all like me
- ○ A little like me
- ○ Kind of like me
- ○ A lot like me
- ○ Just like me

How much do you agree or disagree with the following?

Q55 I often think about doing things so that people in the future can have things better.

- ○ Strongly Disagree
- ○ Disagree
- ○ Not Sure
- ○ Agree
- ○ Strongly Agree

Q56 It is important to me to contribute to my community and society.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Not Sure
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Q57 It's not really my problem if my neighbors are in trouble and need help.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Not Sure
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Q58 If I had to choose between helping to raise money for a neighborhood project and enjoying my own free time, I'd keep my freedom.

- ○ Strongly Disagree
- ○ Disagree
- ○ Not Sure
- ○ Agree
- ○ Strongly Agree

Think about how you see your future.
What are the chances for the following?

Q59 Be involved in community service.

- ○ Very Low
- ○ Low
- ○ About 50/50
- ○ High
- ○ Very High

Q60 Be involved helping other people.

- Very Low
- Low
- About 50/50
- High
- Very High

"Helping" includes any activity that you are not required to do but do to improve things or make things easier for people.

How often do you do the following things?

Q61 Help a friend.

- Never
- Seldom
- Sometimes
- Often
- Very Often

Q62 Help a neighbor.

- Never
- Seldom
- Sometimes
- Often
- Very Often

Please answer the following questions to the best of your ability.

Q63 How old are you?

- 13
- 14
- 15
- 16
- 17
- 18
- 19
- 20

Q64 I identify as...?

- ○ Male
- ○ Female
- ○ Non-binary

Q65 Which of the following best describes you?

- ○ Asian, Asian American or Pacific Islander, including Chinese, Japanese, and others
- ○ Black or African American
- ○ Hispanic or Latino/a, including Mexican American, Central American, and others
- ○ Native American or Alaskan Native
- ○ White or Caucasian
- ○ Multiracial or Biracial
- ○ A race/ethnicity not listed here (Please Type In)

_____

Q66 What is your current grade in school?

- ○ Sophomore
- ○ Junior
- ○ Other (Type in) _____

Q67 How would you best describe your family structure?

- ○ I live with two parents
- ○ I live with only one parent
- ○ I live with one relative, but not my parent
- ○ I live with two relatives or more, but not my parents
- ○ I live with a guardian
- ○ Other (Please explain) _____

Q68 How would you describe where you live?

- ○ On a farm
- ○ In a rural area but not on a farm
- ○ Neighborhood outside of town
- ○ In town
- ○ Other (Please Explain) _____

Q69 During the current school year or last school year, in which of the following career areas did you take Career Technical Education (CTE) courses? Mark all that apply.

- ☐ Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources
- ☐ Architecture and Construction
- ☐ Arts, Audio/Visual Technology and Communications
- ☐ Business, Management, and Administration
- ☐ Education and Training
- ☐ Finance
- ☐ Hospitality and Tourism
- ☐ Human Services
- ☐ Information Technology
- ☐ Law, Public Safety, Corrections and Security
- ☐ Manufacturing
- ☐ Marketing, Sales and Service
- ☐ Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
- ☐ Government and Public Administration

- [ ] Health Science
- [ ] Transportation, Distribution and Logistics
- [ ] None

Q70 During the current school year or last school year, in which of the following curricular-based organizations did you participate? Mark all that apply.

- ☐ Business Professional of America
- ☐ DECA
- ☐ FBLA-PBL
- ☐ FCCLA
- ☐ FFA
- ☐ HOSA - Future Health Professionals
- ☐ SkillsUSA
- ☐ TSA
- ☐ Educators Rising
- ☐ None
- ☐ Other (Type in) _____

Q71 During the current school year or last school year, which of the following leadership roles did you take part in at your school? Mark all that apply.

- ☐ Student Council
- ☐ Class Officer
- ☐ School Organization Officer
- ☐ Captain of Athletic Team
- ☐ Office Assistant
- ☐ Teacher Assistant
- ☐ School Improvement Council
- ☐ None
- ☐ Other (Please List) _____

Q72 During the current school year or last school year, in which of the following arts-based courses/activities did you participate? Mark all that apply.

- ☐ Choir
- ☐ Band
- ☐ Art
- ☐ Drama
- ☐ Dance
- ☐ Journalism
- ☐ Yearbook
- ☐ None
- ☐ Other (Please List) _____

Q73 During the current school year or last school year, in which of the following extra-curricular activities did you participate? Mark all that apply.

- ☐ Topic-Based Club (Chess Club, Fishing Club, FCA, etc.)
- ☐ Basketball
- ☐ Football
- ☐ Baseball
- ☐ Volleyball
- ☐ Softball
- ☐ Cheerleading
- ☐ Soccer
- ☐ Golf
- ☐ Wrestling
- ☐ Cross Country
- ☐ Swimming
- ☐ Tennis
- ☐ Track and Field

- [ ] Rodeo
- [ ] None
- [ ] Other (Please List) _____

Q74 During the past two years, in which of the following community-based activities did you participate? Mark all that apply.

- [ ] 4-H
- [ ] Boy Scouts
- [ ] Girl Scouts
- [ ] Church Youth Group
- [ ] Community Organized Sports
- [ ] Community Organized Arts
- [ ] None
- [ ] Other (Please List) _____

Q75 During the current school year and last school year, in which of the following classroom learning delivery models did you spend the **greatest percentage** of time? Mark only one.

- ○ Traditional In-person Class
- ○ Remote Learning (Communicated online with my teachers about course work, but did not attend in-person classes)
- ○ Hybrid (Combination of in-person and remote)
- ○ Virtual School (Took courses through a virtual school platform with teachers not from my school)

Appendix L - Student Survey Link Correspondence

Dear (Principal Name),

Thank you! Please review the following in preparation for administering the survey next week:

The link for the survey to share with students is: **(Name of School) Positive Youth Development Survey**

- I would encourage you to test the link and make sure everything is viewable and assessable for students before the actual day and time of the survey administration so we can troubleshoot any issues. The same link can be shared to all students.

- Please remember that Institutional Review Board (IRB) requires that the students give their assent to taking the survey in addition to parental consent. Please have each student sign the combined consent/assent form and have someone serve as a witness and sign as well if this has not already been completed.

- IRB also requires that the students receive a copy of the signed consent/assent to have and to take home to their parents/guardian. Please make sure students receive a copy before taking the survey so we can be compliant.

I just want you to know how much I truly appreciate your time and commitment to this research project. I definitely could not be doing this without you!

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. My cell number is (Number)

Take care,

Jason

Kansas State University
Graduate Teaching Assistant - Agricultural Education

Appendix M - Student Focus Group Interview Protocol

Focus-Group Interview Protocol

Students

School: _____

Date: _____

Number Attending: _____

Researcher conducting session: _____

Before starting the interview, consent/assent forms will be checked and students will be provided as copy of the signed consent/assent form.

My name is _____ and I will be facilitating this focus group interview. Let me start by thanking you for your willingness to speak with me today. The purpose of this research study is to explore what services, opportunities, and supports in your school are making a positive difference in student mental health and youth development. Your opinions and thoughts are valuable and will provide important insights into what is truly working at your school to strengthen mental health and youth development. The information gained from this interview can help your school and other schools implement and provide specific programs and opportunities that support students.

This focus group interview will take approximately 60 minutes and will follow a designed interview protocol. A second, follow-up, focus group interview may need to occur based on the information collected today. As an incentive to participate, each of you will receive $10.00 in cash at the conclusion of our interview today.

Shortly, I will be asking each of you to tell me a little about yourselves and your interests. Even though I will ask you to share your names, I want you to know I will be protecting your privacy by coding all of the transcripts from our conversations with pseudonyms instead of your actual names.

Do any of you have any questions before we begin?

(Note: the researcher will use phrases such as "Tell me more", "Could you give me an example?", "Could you explain that?" as prompts solicit more detailed information when needed.)

1. To get started, I would like for each of you to tell me your name, what grade you are in, what you like to do at school, and what you like to do outside of school. (The interviewer will also provide similar information to develop rapport)

2. When you hear the word mental health, what comes to mind?

3. Student mental health is a much talked about subject today, why do you think this is the case?

4. What are factors that contribute to poor mental health in youth?

5. How would you describe the overall mental health of students at your school?

6. Do you feel your school cares about the mental health of students? Why or why not?

7. What does your school do to address student mental health concerns and issues that you are aware of?

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is a perspective grounded in a positive view of youth that values their strengths and assets over problematic behavior. PYD seeks to identify the environments which promote thriving during adolescent years and positive growth and development into adults who contribute to their communities and society. This study is focused on what is known as the "Six Cs" of PYD: Confidence, Competence, Compassion, Character, Connection, and Contribution, and how these are developed and nurtured in young people.

Confidence is defined as the internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy, positive identity, and belief in the future.

8. How would you describe the overall confidence of students at your school?

9. What does your school do to develop and build confidence in students?

Competence is defined a positive view of one's actions in specific areas, including social, academic, and vocational.

10. How would you describe the overall competence of students at your school?

11. What does your school do to develop and build competence in students?

Compassion/Caring is a sense of sympathy and empathy for others.

12. How would you describe the overall compassion of students at your school?

13. What does your school do to develop and build compassion in students?

Character is defined as having respect for societal and cultural rules, possession of standards for correct behaviors, a sense of right and wrong, morality.

14. How would you describe the overall character of students at your school?
15. What does your school do to develop and build character in students?

Connection is defined as having positive bonds with people and institutions – peers, family, school, and community – in which both parties contribute to the relationship.

16. How would you describe the overall sense of connection students have at your school?
17. What does your school do to develop and build connection among students?

Contribution is defined as contributing positively to self, family, community, and civil society. Giving back, volunteering time, helping others.

18. How would you describe the overall level of contribution of students at your school?
19. What does your school do to develop and build contribution among students?

These six developmental outcomes can only be achieved with significant support from the entire community – family, friends, schools, and other community institutions. Organizations using a positive youth development approach provide services, opportunities, and supports (SOS) that enhance the young person's environment and increases his or her ability to reach these outcomes.

A service is an action done to or for youth intended to improve their health, safety, and overall well-being. (Examples: Counseling services, medical services, providing food for food insecurity, etc.)

20. Tell me about specific services offered at your school that you believe improve student mental health and the six "Cs" of PYD.

Opportunities are actions by youth that offer meaningful and real ways to influence the world around them, nurture their interests and talents, and increase connectedness to school and community. (Examples: Extracurricular activities, clubs, Co-curricular activities, leadership opportunities, etc.)

21. Tell me about specific opportunities for students at your school that you believe improve student mental health and the six "Cs" of PYD.

Supports are activities done with youth to facilitate access to interpersonal relationships and resources and to offer encouragement during challenging times. (Examples: Peer and Adult Mentorships, Advisory/Advisee time, providing support and encouragement with problems, etc.)

22. Tell me about specific supports at your school that you believe improve student mental health and the six "Cs" of PYD.

Covid Questions

1. Do you feel Covid has had an impact on student mental health and PYD at your school? Explain.

2. What specific steps has your school taken to address the negative impacts of Covid on students?

Appendix N - Focus Group Information Sheet

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is a perspective grounded in a positive view of youth that values their strengths and assets over problematic behavior. PYD seeks to identify the environments which promote thriving during adolescent years and positive growth and development into adults who contribute to their communities and society. This study is focused on what is known as the "Six Cs" of PYD: Confidence, Competence, Compassion, Character, Connection, and Contribution, and how these are developed and nurtured in young people.

Confidence is defined as the internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy, positive identity, and belief in the future.

Competence is defined a positive view of one's actions in specific areas, including social, academic, and vocational.

Compassion is a sense of sympathy and empathy for others.

Character is defined as having respect for societal and cultural rules, possession of standards for correct behaviors, a sense of right and wrong, morality.

Connection is defined as having positive bonds with people and institutions – peers, family, school, and community – in which both parties contribute to the relationship.

Contribution is defined as contributing positively to self, family, community, and civil society. Giving back, volunteering time, helping others.

These six developmental outcomes can only be achieved with significant support from the entire community – family, friends, schools, and other community institutions. Organizations using a positive youth development approach provide services, opportunities, and supports (SOS) that enhance the young person's environment and increases his or her ability to reach these outcomes.

A **service** is an action done to or for youth intended to improve their health, safety, and overall well-being. (Examples: Counseling services, medical services, providing food for food insecurity, etc.)

Opportunities are actions by youth that offer meaningful and real ways to influence the world around them, nurture their interests and talents, and increase connectedness to school and community. (Examples: Extracurricular activities, clubs, Co-curricular activities, leadership opportunities, etc.)

Supports are activities done with youth to facilitate access to interpersonal relationships and resources and to offer encouragement during challenging times. (Examples: Peer and Adult Mentorships, Advisory/Advisee time, providing support and encouragement with problems, etc.)

Appendix O - Adults Focus Group Interview Protocol

Focus-Group Interview Protocol

Adults (Administrators, Counselors, SEL Support Staff)

School: _____

Date: _____

Number Attending: _____

Researcher conducting session: _____

My name is _____ and I will be facilitating this focus group interview. Let me start by thanking you for your willingness to speak with me today. The purpose of this research study is to explore what services, opportunities, and supports in your school are making a positive difference in student mental health and youth development. Your opinions and thoughts are valuable and will provide important insights into what is truly working at your school to strengthen mental health and youth development. The information gained from this interview can help your school and other schools implement and provide specific programs and opportunities that support students.

Prior to the interview you were sent two consent forms (one to sign and return and one to keep). Did each of you bring your consent letter? If not, I have extra copies. This focus group interview will take approximately two hours and will follow a designed interview protocol. A second, follow-up, focus group interview may need to occur based on the information collected today. Shortly, I will be asking each of you to tell me a little about yourselves. Even though I will ask you to share your names, I want you to know I will be protecting your privacy by coding all of the transcripts from our conversations with pseudonyms instead of your actual names. The name of the school will also not be revealed and a pseudonym will be sued instead of the actual name of the school.

Do any of you have any questions before we begin?

(Note: the researcher will use phrases such as "Tell me more", "Could you give me an example?", "Could you explain that?" as prompts solicit more detailed information when needed.)

1. To get started, I would like for each of you to tell me your name, how many years you have been involved in education, and your key role in the school currently. (The interviewer will also provide similar information to develop rapport)

2. When you hear the term mental health, what comes to mind?

3. Student mental health is a much talked about subject today, why do you think this is the case?

4. What are factors that contribute to poor mental health in youth?

5. How would you describe the overall mental health of students at your school?

6. Do you feel your school is a place where strengthening and improving student mental health is valued? Why or why not?

7. How does your school address student mental health concerns and issues?

Positive Youth Development (PYD) is a perspective grounded in a positive view of youth that values their strengths and assets over problematic behavior. PYD seeks to identify the environments which promote thriving during adolescent years and positive growth and development into adults who contribute to their communities and society. This study is focused on what is known as the "Six C's" of PYD: Confidence, Competence,

Compassion, Character, Connection, and Contribution, and how these are developed and nurtured in young people.

Confidence is defined as the internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy, positive identity, and belief in the future.

8. How would you describe the overall confidence of students at your school?
9. What does your school do to develop and nurture confidence in students?

Competence is defined a positive view of one's actions in specific areas, including social, academic, and vocational.

10. How would you describe the overall competence of students at your school?
11. What does your school do to develop and nurture competence in students?

Compassion is a sense of sympathy and empathy for others.

12. How would you describe the overall compassion of students at your school?
13. What does your school do to develop and nurture compassion in students?

Character is defined as having respect for societal and cultural rules, possession of standards for correct behaviors, a sense of right and wrong, morality.

14. How would you describe the overall character of students at your school?
15. What does your school do to develop and nurture character in students?

Connection is defined as having positive bonds with people and institutions – peers, family, school, and community – in which both parties contribute to the relationship.

16. How would you describe the overall sense of connection students have at your school?

17. What does your school do to develop and nurture connection among students?

Contribution is defined as contributing positively to self, family, community, and civil society. Giving back, volunteering time, helping others.

18. How would you describe the overall level of contribution of students at your school?

19. What does your school do to develop and nurture contribution among students?

These six developmental outcomes can only be achieved with significant support from the entire community – family, friends, schools, and other community institutions. Organizations using a positive youth development approach provide services, opportunities, and supports (SOS) that enhance the young person's environment and increases his or her ability to reach these outcomes.

A service is an action done to or for youth intended to improve their health, safety, and overall well-being. (Examples: Counseling services, medical services, providing food for food insecurity, etc.)

20. Tell me about specific services offered at your school that you believe improve student mental health and the six C's of PYD.

Opportunities are actions by youth that offer meaningful and real ways to influence the world around them, nurture their interests and talents, and increase connectedness to school and community. (Examples: Extracurricular activities, clubs, Co-curricular activities, leadership opportunities, etc.)

21. Tell me about specific opportunities for students at your school that you believe improve student mental health and the six C's of PYD.

Supports are activities done with youth to facilitate access to interpersonal relationships and resources and to offer encouragement during challenging times. (Examples: Peer and Adult Mentorships, Advisory/Advisee time, providing support and encouragement with problems, etc.)

22. Tell me about specific supports at your school that you believe improve student mental health and the six C's of PYD.

Covid Questions

1. Do you feel Covid has had an impact on student mental health and PYD at your school? Explain.

2. What specific steps has your school taken to address the negative impacts of Covid on students?

Appendix P - School Documentation Request

Document Checklist

School: _____

Obtain paper copies or website URL addresses for the following:

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Curriculum (Thinking for a Change, etc.)

Advisory/Advisee Expectations/Curriculum

School and District Policy on SEL and Services, Opportunities, and Support (SOS)

School Staff Training and PD on SEL, SOS, Positive Youth Development (PYD)

Information on Multi-tier System of Student Wellness

SEL, SOS, PYD advertisements for students and parents, Parent/Student newsletters

School-based SEL, SOS. PYD websites and online presence

Therapist or Social Worker Job Description or Posting

News media clippings and articles on school SEL, SOS, PYD initiatives

Grants for SEL/SOS/PYD

Data relevant to topic (SRSS Panorama, GRIT, Growth Mindset, etc.)

Evidence of making connections with community – Public/Private Partnerships

Communities in School Information (WV only)

Kansas Communities that Care Data (KS only)

Appendix Q - Informal School Observation Data Collection Guide

Case Study Observation Guiding Questions

School: _____

Morning Hall/Office Observations/School Culture

How are students greeted by adults when they enter the school and the classrooms?

What are the student conversations about?

Are adults in the hallway interacting with students?

Lunch Room Observations

How are students grouped together?

Do teachers or other adults eat with students?

Are there activities during lunch time?

Hallway Observations

Look at walls, what and who is celebrated most in the school?

Are there advertisements for SOS?

What type of conversations and language can be overheard in the hallway?

Are there any signs of the school making connection with the community?

Support Classroom Observations

What is being taught?

How many students are in the class? What is the environment in the class?

Co-curricular and Extracurricular Observations

What opportunities are available at the school?

What type of hallway presence do these activities have?

If I get to observe a club or sports meeting, describe what is observed.

Appendix R - School Survey Data Summary Example

High School

Kansas State University

Student Mental Health and Positive Youth Development Report

N=8 Students

The first part of the survey consisted of the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) of the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). The instructions indicated that these 20 items are ways "you might have felt or behaved." Students scored themselves based on how often they felt this way during the past week. Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day) was given a score of "0"; Some or a little of the time (1-2 days) was given a score of "1"; Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days) was given a score of "2"; and Most or all of the time (5-7 days) was given a score of "3". Questions 4, 8, 12, and 16 were reverse coded (**). The possible range of scores for the total depression score is zero to 60, with higher scores indicating the presence of more depression.

Depression Scale Question Summary/Total Score				
Questions	N	Kansas Mean	School Mean	School Std. Deviation
I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me.	8	0.90	0.75	1.16
I did not feel like eating; my appetite was poor.	8	0.89	0.75	1.16
I felt that I could not shake off the blues even with help from my family or friends.	8	0.95	0.63	1.06
I felt I was just as good as other people. **	8	1.57	0.88	1.35
I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing.	8	1.65	0.75	1.16
I felt depressed.	8	1.10	0.38	1.06
I felt that everything I did was an effort.	7	1.37	0.86	0.90
I felt hopeful about the future. **	8	1.16	0.50	0.53
I thought my life was a failure.	8	0.84	0.63	1.06
I felt fearful.	8	0.79	0.88	1.12
My sleep was restless.	8	1.33	1.38	0.91
I was happy. **	8	1.03	0.63	0.74
I talked less than usual.	8	0.98	1.00	0.92
I felt lonely.	8	0.90	0.50	0.75
I felt like people were unfriendly.	8	0.70	0.75	0.88
I enjoyed life. **	8	0.97	0.63	0.74
I had crying spells.	8	0.75	0.50	0.75

I felt sad.	8	1.22	0.75	1.16
I felt that people dislike me.	8	0.98	0.88	0.83
I could not get "going".	8	1.16	0.38	0.74
Total Depression Score	**7**	**21.41**	**14.14**	**15.18**

Rarely or none of the time (less than 1 day) was given a score of “0”; Some or a little of the time (1-2 days) was given a score of “1”; Occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3-4 days) was given a score of “2”; and Most or all of the time (5-7 days) was given a score of “3”

Depression: Gender Comparison by Question

Questions	I identify as...?	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me.	Male	3	0.00	0.00
	Female	5	1.20	1.30
I did not feel like eating; my appetite was poor.	Male	3	1.00	1.73
	Female	5	0.60	00.89
I felt that I could not shake off the blues even with help from my family or friends.	Male	3	0.33	0.57
	Female	5	0.80	1.30
I felt I was just as good as other people.	Male	3	0.00	0.00
	Female	5	1.40	1.51
I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing.	Male	3	0.00	0.00
	Female	5	1.20	1.30
I felt depressed.	Male	3	0.00	0.00
	Female	5	0.60	1.34
I felt that everything I did was an effort.	Male	3	1.00	1.00
	Female	4	0.75	0.95
I felt hopeful about the future.	Male	3	0.67	0.57
	Female	5	0.40	0.54
I thought my life was a failure.	Male	3	0.00	0.00
	Female	5	1.00	1.22
I felt fearful.	Male	3	0.33	0.57
	Female	5	1.20	1.30
My sleep was restless.	Male	3	1.00	1.00
	Female	5	1.60	0.89
I was happy.	Male	3	0.00	0.00
	Female	5	1.00	00.70

I talked less than usual.	Male	3	1.00	1.00
	Female	5	1.00	1.00
I felt lonely.	Male	3	0.67	1.15
	Female	5	0.40	0.54
I felt like people were unfriendly.	Male	3	0.00	0.00
	Female	5	1.20	0.83
I enjoyed life.	Male	3	0.00	0.00
	Female	5	1.00	0.70
I had crying spells.	Male	3	0.00	0.00
	Female	5	0.80	0.83
I felt sad.	Male	3	0.00	0.00
	Female	5	1.20	1.30
I felt that people dislike me.	Male	3	0.67	0.57
	Female	5	1.00	1.00
I could not get "going".	Male	3	0.33	0.57
	Female	5	0.40	0.89

The possible range of scores for the total depression score is zero to 60, with higher scores indicating the presence of more depression.

Depression: Gender Total Score Comparison

	I identify as...?	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Total Depression	Male	3	7.00	4.58
	Female	4	19.50	18.91

Depression: Grade Total Score Comparison

	What is your current grade in school?	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Total Depression	Sophomore	2	26.00	25.45
	Junior	5	9.40	9.23

Depression: CTE Involvement Comparison

	CTE	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Total Depression	No	3	25.66	17.55
	Yes	4	5.50	4.79

Depression: Arts Involvement Comparison				
	Arts	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Total Depression	No	2	17.50	9.19
	Yes	5	12.80	17.79

The Positive Youth Development (PYD) portion of the survey consisted of 40 questions measuring the Six "Cs" of PYD: Competence, Character, Confidence, Caring/Compassion, Connection and Contribution. Students responded to the prompt, "How much are the following statements like you?" for the first 34 questions. A 5-point Likert scale was used with 1 = "Not at all like me"; 2 = "A little like me"; 3 = "Kind of like me"; 4 = "A lot like me"; and 5 = "Just like me".

Questions 35-38 used the prompt, "How much do you agree or disagree with the following?" with a 5-point Likert scale of 1 = "Strongly Disagree"; 2 = "Disagree"; 3 = "Not sure"; 4 = "Agree"; and 5 = "Strongly Agree". Questions 37 and 38 were reverse coded (**).

The last two questions asked "Think about how you see your future. What are your chances for the following?" A 5-point Likert scale of 1 = "Very low"; 2 = "Low"; 3 = "About 50/50"; 4 = "High"; and 5 = "Very High" was used.

Positive Youth Development (PYD) Question Summary				
Questions	N	Kansas Mean	School Mean	School Std. Deviation
I have a lot of friends.	8	3.05	3.13	0.99
I do very well in my classwork at school.	8	3.44	4.38	0.91
I am better than others my age at sports.	8	2.32	2.50	1.51
I am happy with myself most of the time.	8	2.89	3.38	1.06
I hardly ever do things I know I shouldn't do.	8	3.21	3.75	1.48
I really like the way I look.	8	2.54	2.63	0.91
All in all, I am glad I am me.	8	3.48	4.13	0.83
I want to make the world a better place to live.	8	3.70	4.00	1.19
I accept responsibility for my actions when I make a mistake or get in trouble.	8	3.95	4.00	1.06
I enjoy being with people of a different race or ethnicity.	8	4.32	3.50	1.41
When I see someone being taken advantage of, I want to help them.	8	3.83	3.87	1.35

When I see someone being picked on, I feel sorry for them.	8	3.97	3.87	1.24
When I see another person who is hurt or upset, I feel sorry for them.	8	3.95	4.13	0.83
I receive a lot of encouragement at my school.	8	2.92	3.63	1.40
I am a useful and important member of my family.	8	3.41	3.75	0.88
I feel like an important member of my local community.	8	2.46	3.00	1.51
I feel my friends are good friends.	8	3.97	3.75	1.28
I am just as smart as others my age.	8	3.29	3.88	1.55
I could do well at just about any new physical or athletic activity.	8	2.78	2.88	1.64
I am popular with others my age.	8	2.57	3.25	1.16
I am good looking.	8	2.52	2.75	1.03
I usually act the way I am supposed to.	8	3.56	3.75	1.03
I am happy the way I am.	8	3.25	3.50	0.75
When I am an adult I will have a good life.	8	3.68	4.13	0.99
I give time and money to make life better for other people.	8	3.32	3.13	1.24
I do what I believe is right, even if my friends make fun of me.	8	3.62	3.75	1.28
I know a lot about people of other races and ethnicities.	8	3.32	2.38	1.30
It bothers me when bad things happen to any person.	8	3.59	3.50	1.41
I feel sorry for other people who don't have what I have.	8	3.22	3.13	1.45
It makes me sad to see a person who doesn't have friends.	8	3.65	3.25	1.66
Teachers at school push me to be the best I can be.	8	3.54	4.63	0.74
I have lots of good conversations with my parents.	8	3.16	3.63	1.50
Adults in my town or city listen to what I have to say.	8	2.59	3.00	1.19
My friends care about me.	8	3.81	3.63	1.06
I often think about doing things so that people in the future can have things better.	8	3.57	3.75	1.58
It is important to me to contribute to my community and society.	8	3.73	4.00	1.30
It's not really my problem if my neighbors are in trouble and need help. **	8	3.92	4.13	0.99
If I had to choose between helping to raise money for a neighborhood project and enjoying my own free time, I'd keep my freedom. **	8	2.95	2.88	1.24
Be involved in community service.	8	3.17	4.38	0.74
Be involved helping other people.	8	3.60	4.13	0.83

PYD: Gender Comparison by Question				
Questions	I identify as...?	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
I have a lot of friends.	Male	3	2.67	0.57
	Female	5	3.40	1.14
I do very well in my classwork at school.	Male	3	3.67	1.15
	Female	5	4.80	0.44
I am better than others my age at sports.	Male	3	2.00	1.00
	Female	5	2.80	1.78
I am happy with myself most of the time.	Male	3	4.00	1.00
	Female	5	3.00	1.00
I hardly ever do things I know I shouldn't do.	Male	3	2.67	2.08
	Female	5	4.40	0.54
I really like the way I look.	Male	3	2.33	0.57
	Female	5	2.80	1.09
All in all, I am glad I am me.	Male	3	4.67	0.57
	Female	5	3.80	0.83
I want to make the world a better place to live.	Male	3	2.67	0.57
	Female	5	4.80	0.44
I accept responsibility for my actions when I make a mistake or get in trouble.	Male	3	3.33	1.52
	Female	5	4.40	0.54
I enjoy being with people of a different race or ethnicity.	Male	3	2.00	1.00
	Female	5	4.40	0.54
When I see someone being taken advantage of, I want to help them.	Male	3	2.67	1.52
	Female	5	4.60	0.54
When I see someone being picked on, I feel sorry for them.	Male	3	2.67	1.15
	Female	5	4.60	0.54
When I see another person who is hurt or upset, I feel sorry for them.	Male	3	3.33	0.57
	Female	5	4.60	0.54
I receive a lot of encouragement at my school.	Male	3	3.00	2.00
	Female	5	4.00	1.00
I am a useful and important member of my family.	Male	3	4.00	0.00
	Female	5	3.60	1.14
I feel like an important member of my local community.	Male	3	3.00	1.73
	Female	5	3.00	1.58
I feel my friends are good friends.	Male	3	3.33	1.15
	Female	5	4.00	1.41

I am just as smart as others my age.	Male	3	3.33	2.08
	Female	5	4.20	1.30
I could do well at just about any new physical or athletic activity.	Male	3	2.67	1.52
	Female	5	3.00	1.87
I am popular with others my age.	Male	3	2.67	1.52
	Female	5	3.60	0.89
I am good looking.	Male	3	2.33	1.15
	Female	5	3.00	1.00
I usually act the way I am supposed to.	Male	3	3.00	1.00
	Female	5	4.20	0.83
I am happy the way I am.	Male	3	4.00	0.00
	Female	5	3.20	0.83
When I am an adult I will have a good life.	Male	3	3.33	1.15
	Female	5	4.60	0.54
I give time and money to make life better for other people.	Male	3	2.67	1.52
	Female	5	3.40	1.14
I do what I believe is right, even if my friends make fun of me.	Male	3	2.67	1.52
	Female	5	4.40	0.54
I know a lot about people of other races and ethnicities.	Male	3	1.67	1.15
	Female	5	2.80	1.30
It bothers me when bad things happen to any person.	Male	3	2.67	2.08
	Female	5	4.00	0.70
I feel sorry for other people who don't have what I have.	Male	3	2.00	1.00
	Female	5	3.80	1.30
It makes me sad to see a person who doesn't have friends.	Male	3	2.33	2.30
	Female	5	3.80	1.09
Teachers at school push me to be the best I can be.	Male	3	5.00	0.00
	Female	5	4.40	0.89
I have lots of good conversations with my parents.	Male	3	3.00	2.00
	Female	5	4.00	1.22
Adults in my town or city listen to what I have to say.	Male	3	3.00	1.00
	Female	5	3.00	1.41
My friends care about me.	Male	3	3.33	1.15
	Female	5	3.80	1.09
I often think about doing things so that people in the future can have things better.	Male	3	2.33	1.52
	Female	5	4.60	0.89
It is important to me to contribute to my community and society.	Male	3	3.00	1.73
	Female	5	4.60	0.54

It's not really my problem if my neighbors are in trouble and need help.	Male	3	4.00	1.73
	Female	5	4.20	0.44
If I had to choose between helping to raise money for a neighborhood project and enjoying my own free time, I'd keep my freedom.	Male	3	1.67	0.57
	Female	5	3.60	0.89
Be involved in community service.	Male	3	4.00	1.00
	Female	5	4.60	0.54
Be involved helping other people.	Male	3	3.67	1.15
	Female	5	4.40	0.54

For the PYD overall scores, the values were rescaled to a range of 0-100. The higher the score, the stronger the student possesses that specific PYD construct.

PYD Overall Scores

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Kansas Mean	School Mean	School Std. Deviation
PYD Competence	8	30.00	90.00	58.14	66.66	19.18
PYD Character	8	40.00	100.00	72.46	70.62	18.98
PYD Confidence	8	50.00	83.33	61.18	68.33	11.40
PYD Caring	8	30.00	100.00	74.02	72.50	24.34
PYD Connection	8	40.00	95.00	64.64	72.50	17.32
PYD Contribution	8	50.00	90.00	69.84	77.50	16.59

PYD: Gender Comparison of Overall Score

	I identify as...?	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Competence	Male	3	56.66	23.33
	Female	5	72.66	15.88
Character	Male	3	51.66	10.10
	Female	5	82.00	12.17
Confidence	Male	3	68.88	10.18
	Female	5	68.00	13.24
Caring	Male	3	52.22	27.75
	Female	5	84.66	12.60
Connection	Male	3	69.16	7.21
	Female	5	74.50	22.03
Contribution	Male	3	62.22	18.35
	Female	5	86.66	5.77

For the PYD overall scores, the values were rescaled to a range of 0-100. The higher the score, the stronger the student possesses that specific PYD construct.

PYD: Grade Comparison of Overall Score				
	What is your current grade in school?	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Competence	Sophomore	3	47.77	15.39
	Junior	5	78.00	9.88
Character	Sophomore	3	77.50	21.36
	Junior	5	66.50	18.59
Confidence	Sophomore	3	65.55	9.62
	Junior	5	70.00	13.12
Caring	Sophomore	3	67.77	35.32
	Junior	5	75.33	19.66
Connection	Sophomore	3	76.66	14.21
	Junior	5	70.00	20.07
Contribution	Sophomore	3	76.66	23.09
	Junior	5	78.00	14.64

PYD: CTE Involvement Comparison				
	CTE	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Competence	No	3	72.22	15.03
	Yes	5	63.33	22.23
Character	No	3	75.00	7.50
	Yes	5	68.00	24.07
Confidence	No	3	60.00	10.00
	Yes	5	73.33	9.71
Caring	No	3	77.77	10.71
	Yes	5	69.33	30.76
Connection	No	3	61.66	18.76
	Yes	5	79.00	14.42
Contribution	No	3	85.55	7.69
	Yes	5	72.66	19.35

For the PYD overall scores, the values were rescaled to a range of 0-100. The higher the score, the stronger the student possesses that specific PYD construct.

PYD: Arts Involvement Comparison				
	Arts	**N**	**Mean**	**Std. Deviation**
Competence	No	2	80.00	9.42
	Yes	6	62.22	20.07
Character	No	2	62.50	7.07
	Yes	6	73.33	21.42
Confidence	No	2	75.00	7.07
	Yes	6	66.11	12.18
Caring	No	2	56.66	18.85
	Yes	6	77.77	25.00
Connection	No	2	68.75	5.30
	Yes	6	73.75	20.17
Contribution	No	2	65.00	16.49
	Yes	6	81.66	15.74

Appendix S - Coding Guide

Name	Description
Pressure	Student feelings of pressure from sources outside of themselves.
Parents	Statements and actions from parents that make students feel pressure.
Peers	Statements and actions from peers that make students feel pressure.
School	Statements and actions from adults in the school that make students feel pressure.
Time Management	Students feel pressure if they lack the time to complete important tasks: homework, jobs, social time, and sleep.
Technology	References to modern technology used by youth to communicate, collaborate, and express themselves.
Social Media	References to online platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, and Snapchat that youth associate with both positively and negatively.
Electronic Communication	Comments made about how electronic communication with cell phones has hurt social interactions with youth.
School-based Technology	Comments made about how technology is used too much in schools for assignments and communication.
Home Life	References to situations and events that occur in the home of the child and not at school.
Trauma	Comments made about bad things happening in the home, such as abuse.
Drugs	Comments made about parents using drugs in the home and perhaps being absent from the home because of drugs.
Poverty	Comments made about parents not working and the family not having enough money.

Family Structure	Comments made about family structure changes in the home because of trauma or drugs. Grandparents raising children for example.
Bullying	References to being picked on by peers for being different.
Difference	Comments about how students who are different than peers in schools typically get picked on and singled out. Being poor and struggling mentally are two examples.
Joking	Bullying in the form of verbal joking and picking.
Judging	Bulling in the form of judging others for being a certain way.
Stigma	Negative opinions about people who struggle with mental health.
Parents	Comments about how parents can be a source of mental health stigma based on comments and actions.
Peers	Comments about how peers can be a source of mental health stigma based on comments and actions.
School	Comments about how adults at the school can be a source of mental health stigma based on comments and stigma.
Anxiety	Feelings of anxiousness caused by the pressure students feel.
Stress	Feelings of stress from being overwhelmed with too much to do and complete.
Depression	Comments about feeling depressed.
Lack of healthy coping	Students coping with their emotions and situations in negative and unhealthy ways.
Suicidal comments	Students making jokes, social media posts, and random comments about taking their own life.
Student Level Confidence	How the confidence level of students is described.
Varies with student	Students describe how confidence levels are very different when comparing students.
Linked to academics	Students connect their confidence to doing well or poorly in certain academic subjects.

Self-identity and worth	Student confidence is linked to what students' value about themselves.
School Actions Confidence	The actions happening in the school associated with increasing student confidence.
Words of affirmation and encouragement	Encouraging and affirming words from adults in the school that build up students.
Diverse school opportunities	A diverse offering of school opportunities for students to find a place to build their confidence.
Student Level Competence	How the competence level of students is described.
School-subject centered	Students connect their competence to doing well or poorly in certain school subjects.
Linked to school-based opportunities	Student competence is linked to activities in the school where students can feel competent.
Social competence	Competence associated with being able to communicate well with peers.
School Actions Competence	The actions happening in the school associated with increasing student competence.
Teacher actions	Comments made about how teacher actions can encourage or discourage student competence.
Hands-on classes	Comments made about how hands-on classes build competence in students.
College and career ready opportunities	Comments made about how providing college and career ready opportunities in school builds students competence.
Student voice	Comments made about how giving students a voice in the school and classroom builds competence.
Success and recognition	Comments made about how when the school recognizes successful students and teams, this can build competence.
Student Level Connection	How the connection level of students is described.
Friend group	Interactions that take place between individuals in a certain friend group within the school.

Teachers	Students feeling connected with certain teachers in their school.
School Actions Connection	The actions happening in the school associated with increasing student connection.
Adult intentionality	Purposeful actions by adults in the school to enhance student connection.
Student voice	Comments made about how giving students a voice in the school and classroom builds connection.
Student organizations	Organizations in the school associated with building student connection.
Extracurricular activities	Comments made about participating in extracurricular activities can build student connection in the school.
Trauma informed discipline	Comments made about how a school-wide approach to trauma informed discipline can build student connection in the school.
Student Level Character	How the character level of students is described.
Acceptance of others	Comments made about how being accepting of others or not being accepting of others is a sign of character.
Respect for others	Comments made about showing respect for others or not showing respect for others is a sign of character.
Behavior	Comments made about how good and poor behavior is a sign of character.
Accountability	Students holding peers accountable for good behavior and acts of strong character.
Connected to home life	Comments made about how student character can either be positive or negative based on the home life of the student.
School Actions Character	The actions happening in the school associated with increasing student character.
Adult modeling	Adults in the school modeling what good character looks like for students through their words and actions.

School focus	Comments made about the school focuses on improving students' character.
Character-based clubs	Clubs in the school that make building student character their focus and mission.
Student Level Compassion	How the compassion level of students is described.
Varies with students	Students describe how compassion levels are very different when comparing students.
Linked to positive behavior	Comments made about positive student behavior is a sign that students have compassion for each other.
Understanding and acceptance	Comments made about how students are compassionate when they understand and are accepting of others.
School Actions Compassion	The actions happening in the school associated with increasing student compassion.
Teacher modeling	Teachers modeling compassion through their words and actions in the school and community.
School focus	Comments made about the school focuses on improving students' compassion.
Student Level Contribution	How the contribution level of students is described.
Volunteerism	Comments made about how students volunteer to help out with school and community events.
School Actions Contribution	The actions happening in the school associated with increasing student contribution.
Community service/service learning	School-based community service and service learning activities students participate in to give back to others.
School and community modeling	Adults in the school and community model contribution through their actions.